

Divine Science:
Reevaluating Rambam's View of Ma'aseh Merkavah

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Introduction

Within Judaism, the areas of Cosmology and Cosmogony are most often where a perceived clash is found between science and religion. Among those who accept the validity of both the Torah and science, various solutions have been posed to these problems, and they generally fall under one of two categories.

The first approach is one of re-interpretation. The general idea is that Genesis (and by extension any other 'scientific' biblical text) was written to be intelligible to its original audience. However, as a divine document, it is axiomatic that it contains actual truth, correct science. Thus, it must be the case that a re-interpretation of Genesis can make it concordant with modern cosmogony.¹

The second approach agrees that the presentation in Genesis was written for biblical people. However, it is not the case that actual science is hidden in the text if one

¹ See:

Aviezer, Nathan. *In the Beginning--: Biblical Creation and Science*. KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1990.

Schroeder, Gerald, Edward Sunshine, and Jeremy Montague. *Genesis and the big bang*. New York, 1990.

only looks closely enough. Thus, the relevance to the modern Jew are the ideas contained, not the details. What is critical is that an all powerful God created the world. In this approach, religion and science are completely bifurcated, two separate systems that are providing answers to different questions. According to this frame shift, it is fundamentally impossible for religion and science to conflict, as they do not coincide whatsoever.²

For the religious person, both of these approaches have their downsides. The first approach often suffers from feeling forced³ and apologetic, even as it retains the importance of the text. Further, this reinterpretation often stands at odds with all prior interpretation, calling into question the validity of medieval and rabbinic interpretations. The second approach tends to downplay the significance of the text. It is the overarching themes that matter, not the details. The value of Genesis can be summed up in a single sentence, leaving little need to explore in any depth the nuanced text.⁴

As is often the case, navigating a middle path may lead to a more satisfying resolution. The goal of this work is to present the Rambam as a paradigm of this middle approach. His approach to Torah and Science is unique and, if properly understood, extremely relevant. It revolves entirely around his understanding of Judaism's esoteric elements.

² Sacks, Jonathan. *The great partnership: Science, religion, and the search for meaning*. Schocken, 2012.

³ Although one has to admit how impressive it is that pretty much throughout all of history, Jews have been able to read whatever modern cosmology they ascribed to into Genesis. Even if the readings are forced, that the book could speak to so many people and their varied cosmological beliefs is itself indicative of a divine origin.

⁴ This dichotomy is just another manifestation of one of the major struggles in Jewish thought. Fundamentalism often feels more satisfying and preserves religious value, but is often based on flimsy and apologetic ideas. A more liberal approach may feel more academically rigorous, but may downplay specific religious meaning and rites. To a certain degree, this issue was the subject of the Maimonidean Controversy, which is somewhat ironic, as this work is attempting to present Rambam as a paradigm of a middle path.

Esoteric traditions within Judaism

Perhaps the earliest source of an esoteric tradition in Chazal is the famous Mishneh in Chagigah 2:1. It states:

“They may not expound upon the subject of forbidden relations in the presence of three. Nor the work of creation in the presence of two. Nor [the work of] the chariot in the presence of one, unless he is a sage and understands of his own knowledge. Whoever speculates upon four things, it would have been better had he not come into the world: what is above, what is beneath, what came before, and what came after. And whoever takes no thought for the honor of his creator, it would have been better had he not come into the world.”⁵

From the Mishneh alone, the subject matter of Ma'aseh Bereshit and Ma'aseh Merkavah is unclear. From the talmudic passages on this Mishneh it is clear that Ma'aseh Bereshit is an esoteric body of knowledge pertaining to the first few chapters of genesis, and Ma'aseh Merkavah is an esoteric body of knowledge pertaining to the cryptic vision in the beginning of Ezekiel as well as Isaiah 6⁶.

However, while the talmud gives us a good picture of what texts these traditions are based on, even going as far as debating exactly which verses are prohibited to expound upon, the content of these traditions, as one might expect, is hardly given. The closest information we get is the famous story of the four sages who entered the pardes. This gives us the impression that some mystical experience may be involved. It also lays out some of the potential dangers involved, explaining in part why the Mishneh forbids teaching it in public. Beyond this, however, we are left in the dark.

⁵ All Mishnah citations are from the Joshua Kulp translation: Kulp, Joshua, *Mishna Yomit*, available here: <https://www.sefaria.org/person/Joshua%20Kulp>

⁶ While the term 'Merkavah', or chariot, does not appear in the text of Ezekiel, Chazal frequently refer to it in this fashion. This likely comes from the content of the vision, which describes Chayot and Ophanim, which literally translate to 'wild animals' and 'wheels', as well as a 'Man' riding upon them.

The Hekhalot literature is the earliest attempt to provide more detail to what the Mishneh so cryptically describes. According to the Hekhalot, Ma'aseh Merkavah refers to a metaphysical ascent through the seven heavens to witness God's throne. The Hekhalot claim to be tannaitic, but as early as the Geonic period, this notion was a matter of dispute, with some accepting the claim, and others, of a more rationistic mindset, rejecting it.⁷

However, while some Geonim reject the authority of Hekhalot, little alternative is presented. The positions seem to be either viewing Merkavah as referring to Hekhalot, or considering that body of knowledge a casualty of history, lost and unknown.⁸

In this regard, Rambam was extremely innovative. He was not the first to reject the Hekhalot, but he was the first to present an alternative. He makes the attempt to reconstruct what Ma'aseh Merkavah and Ma'aseh Bereshit were, and this is remarkable for several reasons. Most significantly, this was a daring move in that it was a departure from all previous scholarships. Granted Rambam was never afraid of innovation when he thought it was correct, but it is still quite a daring attempt. This is made all the more impressive by the fact that he had already done so at the tender age of 23, when he wrote his famed Explanation of the Mishneh⁹. Indeed, his definitions and understanding of these terms seems to be identical throughout all of his later works as well. In reference to that Mishneh in Chagigah he explains that these secrets were hidden because they were too profound for most people to fathom. He then writes:

“And listen to what has become clear to me based upon my own thoughts and what I have seen in the words of the sages. They [the Sages] understand by the Account of Creation natural science and an in-depth exploration of the principles

⁷ In a Responsum, Hai Gaon accepts the authenticity of the Hekhalot, but other Geonim did not agree. See Otzar ha-Geonim 4:13-15.

⁸ An interesting question is how Ma'aseh Bereshit fits into the scheme of Hekhalot, which seems far more focused on Ma'aseh Merkavah. Whether these disciplines are separate, complementary, or identical is not treated until much later writings.

⁹ More accurately, he wrote the work between the ages of 23 and 30, so it is possible the idea developed somewhat later

of existence. By the Account of the Chariot, they understand divine science [or: the science of God, theology], which is an examination of existence in its entirety; the existence of the Creator and His knowledge and attributes and that all existents are necessarily derived from Him; the angels; the soul and intellect of man; and what transpires after death. Because of the stature of these two sciences—the natural and the divine—and their superiority, they were forbidden to be taught in the same manner as the propaedeutic [or mathematical] sciences.”¹⁰

As he makes clear, this innovation is entirely his own. He is commonly understood as identifying Ma'aseh Bereshit with Aristotelean physics, and Ma'aseh Merkavah with Aristotelean Metaphysics, although we will challenge that assumption and provide a more nuanced read in this work.¹¹ The first four chapters of Yesodei Hatorah give a more elaborate version of the same thesis, and it is repeated yet again in the introduction to the *Guide*:

We have already explained in our legal compilations some general propositions concerning this subject and have drawn attention to many themes. Thus we have mentioned there that the Account of the Beginning is identical with natural science, and the Account of the Chariot with divine science¹²

While in the Explanation of the Mishneh, he makes no attempt to explain exactly what this means, and how it fits into the framework of Chazal, he gives us more info in Mishneh Torah, before devoting almost an entire book to it in the Guide.

¹⁰ Translation adapted from Kreisel, pg 34, cited below

¹¹ For an overview of the history of this association, and how it broke off of earlier notions, see: Kreisel, Howard. "Chapter Two. From Esotericism To Science: The Account Of The Chariot In Maimonidean Philosophy Till The End Of The Thirteenth Century." In *The Cultures of Maimonideanism*, pp. 21-56. Brill, 2009.

¹² All citations from the Guide follow the Pines translation: Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (Chicago, 1963)

In the modern period there are several views, both within traditional and academic camps, regarding what this Mishneh refers to. Some accept the Zohar, and later Lurianic traditions, as the authentic Ma'aseh Merkavah. For this school, the sefirot are the main focus.¹³ Others think the Hekhalot works alone represented the authentic Merkavah, but later Kabbalah has distorted their meaning. Still others, heirs to the rationalist tradition, maintain that Ma'aseh Merkavah has been lost. However, for various reasons that will be outlined, little credence is given to the reconstruction of Rambam as a viable possibility. This work will attempt to show the value of Rambam's position, and why it remains relevant.

Overview of Aristotelian Physics and Metaphysics

In order to address Rambam's views on the issue, it is crucial to have a basic understanding of the philosophical atmosphere of his times.¹⁴ The Rambam lived in the Islamic world¹⁵, where at the time, Rationalist Philosophy reigned supreme, and Aristotle was viewed with great favor, almost reverence. What follows is a brief overview of what Physics and Metaphysics meant at the time.¹⁶

The division between metaphysics and physics might more accurately be termed terrestrial physics and astronomical physics. In ancient times, it was thought that the natural state of affairs is that an object in motion eventually came to rest, as after all, that is what we experience on a day-to-day basis. Upon observing that celestial objects did not observe this law, it was determined that two separate sets of physical laws

¹³ Ḥalamish M. Introduction to the Kabbalah, An. SUNY Press; 1999.

¹⁴ For a general overview, see:

Bodnar, Istvan. "Aristotle's natural philosophy." (2006).

Amadio, A. H., and A. J. Kenny. "Aristotle: Greek Philosopher." (2015).

¹⁵ For a more complete discussion of his Islamic sources, see:

Pessin, Sarah. "The influence of Islamic thought on Maimonides." (2005).

¹⁶ Physics and Metaphysics are the names of two books by Aristotle. Interestingly, the term "Meta" just means after, because the book came after physics. Over time, meta took on its modern meaning when readers of the book no longer understood the word's original meaning.

governed the two. Terrestrial physics consists of the four elements, how they make up all matter, and how they function. Celestial physics pertains to objects composed of a fifth, more perfect, element, ether, which operates under different properties. Thus, it was possible for the sun to revolve around the earth *ad infinitum*, while objects on earth did not function in this way.

Further, the revolution of heavenly bodies was understood under the ptolemaic model, and the theory of Celestial Spheres. According to this view, there was a series of concentric spheres surrounding the earth, each with a different heavenly body or bodies attached.¹⁷ The spheres were constantly rotating, explaining the motion of the sun, the moon, and the stars. These spheres of ether were translucent and contained no vacuum in between them.

Another important idea was the Active Intellect. Based on a cryptic passage in Aristotle's *De Anima* that discusses the notion of the Active Intellect, two schools of thought developed. One of them, of which Rambam and his Islamic sources followed, viewed it as a separate intellect that the human intellect could communicate with and thus receive inspiration and truth.¹⁸

Al Farabi, a prominent Islamic Philosopher who influenced Rambam, further developed the theory of the ten separate intellects¹⁹. Every sphere possesses an intellect. Further, each Sphere, by virtue of its separate speed of rotation, must be contemplating a different ideal. Thus there must be an intellect, separate from each sphere, that every sphere is contemplating. By the time of Al Farabi, astronomers had concluded that there were nine spheres.²⁰ These nine separate intellects, plus the

¹⁷ To be more precise, the ninth all encompassing sphere did not have any bodies on it.

¹⁸ The other school of thought viewed it not as a separate intellect but as a part of our own intellects.

¹⁹ For more information see: Sparavigna, Amelia Carolina. "The ten spheres of Al-Farabi: A medieval cosmology." *International Journal of Sciences* 3, no. 6 (2014): 34-39.

²⁰ Earlier estimates placed the number far higher.

active intellect, led to Al Farabi to conclude that there are ten separate intellects²¹. Al Farabi identifies these intellects with angels, an idea Rambam adopts.²²

Metaphysics further encompasses knowledge of the divine, including proofs of God's existence, the nature of his existence, and the way in which he governs the world, as well as non-physical entities in general. It is crucial to note that although modern Metaphysics refers exclusively to this definition and does not include celestial physics, in the era of Rambam this was not the case, which is why astronomy was viewed to a certain degree as a divine science.²³

Understanding the Position of the Rambam

With this background, much of the first four chapters of Yesodei Hatorah becomes clear. Ma'aseh Merkavah encompasses knowledge of God, including proving his existence. It further includes knowledge of angels, of which there are ten types. This is clearly in accordance with Al Farabi's theory of the ten separate intellects, although Rambam does something very significant that Al Farabi did not do: he gives each type of angel scriptural names^{24 25}. Further, prophecy is construed as communion with the

²¹ There was some debate in the Medieval period as to whether there were nine or ten spheres. Rambam is unambiguous, however other sources, both philosophical and kabbalistic, present ten spheres. See: Tanenbaum, Adena. "Nine Spheres or Ten? A Medieval Gloss on Moses Ibn Ezra's Be-Shem El Asher Amar." *Journal of Jewish studies* 47, no. 2 (1996): 294-310.

²² Rabbi Judah Halevi in Kuzari admits this as a possibility as well, although remains unconvinced. See Kuzari 4:3.

²³ Gersonides famously took this position as well.

²⁴ It is very interesting to note that later Kabbalistic sources, including the Zohar (leaving aside for now the question of its dating), accept the notion of ten angelic categories, even if they differ slightly regarding rank and naming scheme.

²⁵ In the Guide he does not give them names. When discussing the Merkavah, Rambam identifies Chayot with the spheres and Ofanim as the elements. Thus, one may raise the question: does not this contradict his presentation in Mishneh Torah and demonstrate that in fact he had not fully developed his theories at that time? However, upon closer examination this is a misunderstanding. This will be treated in depth later in this work.

angels known as Ishim, which corresponds exactly with the theories of earlier philosophers²⁶ that prophecy is communication with the active intellect²⁷.

It is further clear from Mishneh Torah that Ma'aseh Bereshit includes understanding of the four elements, as well as of the celestial spheres, and how their turning affects the earth.²⁸ It is noteworthy that Rambam puts celestial physics as part of Ma'aseh Bereshit, even though Aristotle had placed it as a part of metaphysics.

To be clear, all of these points are spelled out explicitly in the Guide. However, a close reading clearly shows that Rambam already had developed these ideas by the writing of Mishneh Torah, albeit Mishneh Torah was presented completely in Judaic

²⁶ Fascinatingly, Ramban, a much more mystically inclined Rabbi who lived slightly later, ascribed to the theory of the intellects and prophecy as well, incorporating it into his mystical worldview. For example, see Ramban's commentary to Leviticus 16:8 and Deuteronomy 13:2.

²⁷ One difficulty with associating angels with separate intellects is that there are exactly ten intellects, where-as there seem to be ten categories or levels of angels, each one containing multiple beings. While in the Guide it is clear that the angel at each level is a single being, one might think that the plurality of beings in Yesodei Hatorah 2:7 implies otherwise. However, this is not the case, as a close reading of Yesodei Hatorah indicates that Rambam there is of this opinion as well. In law 2:5 he states that non physical beings are only divisible by stature, precluding the possibility of there being multiple Chayot or Seraphim, the plurality in 2:7 notwithstanding. He was certainly aware that the Bible used plural terms, and incorporated this idiom into 2:7, despite his opinion that all angels at a particular level are in reality a single being, or intellect. Indeed, in law 4:6, it is clear he views Ishim as a single entity despite the plural noun. In 8:1 he goes back to referring to them in plural. His position seems to be that while plural terminology is applicable, and indeed biblical, each category is one entity. The name of God in Hebrew, Elokim, is a plural form, and many explanations are given for this. Some say it is because God unites all the diverse powers in the world. Another possibility, more applicable here, is that plurality is simply an honorific. For other examples, see: Exodus 21:34, 22:11, Ecclesiastes 5:10, 7:12, Job 31:39, Genesis 39:20, 42:30, 42:33, I Kings 16:24, and Job 40:15. This notion is called *Pluralis excellentiae*. Rabbi Nissim of Gerona in *Drashot Haran Drasha 2 ch 12* attacks this opinion that angelic classes are singular beings. See:

Gesenius, Wilhelm, Emil Kautzsch, and Arthur Ernest Cowley. *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*. Courier Corporation, 2006.

²⁸ The one major difference between here and the Guide is that here he accepts the theory of epicycles, whereas in the Guide he preferred eccentricity.

terminology.²⁹ It is also noteworthy that he does not invoke Greek sources at all when discussing Ma'aseh Merkavah, but only does so in the discussion of Ma'aseh Bereshit.³⁰

Merkavah According to the Rambam

Now that the requisite background has been given, Rambam's understanding of the Merkavah can be examined. His discussion of Ezekiel is perhaps the most cryptic part of the Guide, and its details are far beyond the scope of the present work. However, the main points can be said with some level of certainty. Further, when analyzing to what degree his reconstruction is plausible, the viability of the main points are all that matters, as the finer points hinge upon them. The following presentation is partially based on Medieval commentaries, but almost all scholars agree that these basic points are correct.

Before attempting to understand his cryptic comments, one must first look elsewhere in the Guide³¹. There is a critical comment in 2:9.

Now I shall first set forth for your benefit a preface needed for the purpose that I have in view in this chapter. This preface is as follows. Know that regarding the spheres of Venus and Mercury there exists a difference of opinion among the early mathematicians about whether they are above the sun or below the sun. For there is no demonstration proving to us what the position of these two spheres is. The doctrine of all the ancients was that the spheres of Venus and

²⁹ For an excellent overview of this topic, see:

Rudavsky, T. M. "Philosophical cosmology in Judaism." *Early Science and Medicine* 2, no. 2 (1997): 149-184.

Rudavsky Argues that there are large differences between the presentation in Mishneh Torah and the Guide, but almost all of the differences she presents can be explained by the simple observation that Halacha and philosophy are different genres and accordingly get different presentations.

³⁰ As seen in Yesodei Hatorah 3:5. One could argue that this is merely because the previous sections were based partly on judaic sources and partly on Greek sources, whereas this section is entirely from Greek sources.

³¹ As Rambam himself instructed us in the introduction.

Mercury are above the sun. Know this and keep it entirely present in your mind. Then Ptolemy came and decided in favor of the opinion that they were both below the sun, saying that the greatest likeness to a natural order would be manifested in the sun's being in the middle with three planets above and three below. Then came latter-day groups of people in Andalusia who became very proficient in mathematics and explained, conforming to Ptolemy's premises, that Venus and Mercury were above the sun. In fact, Ibn Aflah of Sevilla, whose son I have met, has written a celebrated book about this. Thereupon the excellent philosopher Abii Bakr Ibn al-Sa'igh, under the guidance of one of whose pupils I have read texts, reflected on this notion and showed various ways of argumentation - transcribed by us from him - by means of which the opinion that Venus and Mercury are above the sun may be shown to be improbable. However, the argument set forth by Abu Bakr is one purporting to show that this opinion is improbable, not one purporting to disprove it entirely. Whether this matter be so or not, all the early mathematicians put Venus and Mercury above the sun. For this reason they counted five spheres: namely, the sphere of the moon, which undoubtedly is contiguous with us; that of the sun, which is necessarily above it; that of the five planets; that of the fixed stars; and the all-encompassing sphere in which there are no stars. Accordingly, the number of informed spheres, I mean to say the spheres with forms, in which there are stars - for as is generally known from their books, the ancients called the stars forms - is four; namely, the sphere of the fixed stars, that of the five planets, that of the sun, and that of the moon; while above all of them there is one empty sphere in which there is no star. Now this number is for me a very important basis for a notion that has occurred to me and that I have not seen explicitly stated by any philosopher. I found, however, in the dicta of the philosophers and the discourse of the Sages indications that drew my attention to it. I shall accordingly mention them and explain the notion in the following chapter.

He goes on to explain in the next chapter that each of these spheres corresponds with one of the four elements. The moon controls water, the sun fire, the planets, with their varied motion, air, and the fixed zodiac earth.

In the third part of the Guide, when he enters into a verse by verse explanation of Ezekiel chapter one, the consensus of classical commentators is that the chayot of the Merkavah correspond to these spheres³², and the Ophanim are the four elements. The 'Man on a Throne' refers to the separate intellects. He further explains that the Targum had a dissenting view, that the Ophanim are the spheres themselves.³³

Perhaps the most surprising thing about Rambam's interpretation of the Chariot is that, on two occasions, one of which is quite central, he thinks Ezekiel was incorrect. The first such occasion is on the sounds or music produced by the motion of the spheres. In Guide 2:8 he writes:

One of the ancient opinions that are widespread among the philosophers and the general run of people consists in the belief that the motion of the spheres produces very fearful and mighty sounds. Their proof for this belief consisted in their saying that when the small bodies that are with us move with a rapid motion, a great clatter and a disturbing boom are heard to proceed from them. In consequence this should be all the more the case with respect to the bodies of the sun, the moon, and the stars, having regard to their size and velocity. The entire sect of Pythagoras believes that these bodies emit pleasant sounds having-though mighty-the same proportion to each other as that obtaining in musical melodies. And it was their task to give the reasons why we do not hear these fearful and mighty sounds. This opinion also is generally known in our religious community. Do you not see that the Sages describe the might of the sound produced by the sun when it every day proceeds on its way in the sphere?! The same affirmation with regard to the whole necessarily follows. Aristotle, however, does not accept this and makes it clear that the heavenly bodies produce no sound. You will find this statement in his book "On the Heaven"; from the passage there you will understand this. You should not find it

³² Which themselves are intelligent beings, not to be confused with the separate intellects.

³³ It remains unclear what then the Chayot are. Perhaps the Ophanim are the physical Spheres, the Chayot the intellects of the spheres, and the 'Man' the separate intellects.

blameworthy that the opinion of Aristotle disagrees with that of the Sages, may their memory be blessed, as to this point. For this opinion, I mean to say the one according to which the heavenly bodies produce sounds, is consequent upon the belief in a fixed sphere and in stars that return. You know, on the other hand, that in these astronomical matters they preferred the opinion of the sages of the nations of the world to their own. For they explicitly say: The sages of the nations of the world have vanquished. And this is correct. For everyone who argues in speculative matters does this according to the conclusions to which he was led by his speculation. Hence the conclusion whose demonstration is correct is believed.

Both Efodi and Shem Tov, two classic commentators, assume that in saying “This opinion also is generally known in our religious community”, Rambam means to refer to Ezekiel himself. Presumably, this is a reference to Ezekiel 1:24:

When they moved, I could hear the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the sound of Shaddai, a tumult like the din of an army. When they stood still, they would let their wings droop.³⁴

The second, far more central point in which he ascribes error to Ezekiel is in his four-sphere cosmology. Not only does he think there are nine spheres, but he places the sun in the center, rendering any such four sphere configuration impossible.³⁵ Central to his view of the Merkavah is that each Sphere corresponds to one of the elements, so it is

³⁴ *Tanakh, The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text.* (1985).

³⁵ To be sure, he merely says it is improbable that the sun is not in the center. However, in Mishneh Torah he assumes the sun is in the center and does not mention any dissent. T. M Rudavsky understands that Rambam in Mishneh Torah divides the heavens into 4 parts. This is based on his language in 3:1, which lists four talmudic names of the heavens. However, it would seem from the context that these are meant as synonyms for “Galgal”, not as a four way division. Indeed, these are just four of the seven names of the heavens given in the Talmud, which in the Guide are equated with the Spheres. Further, since the sun is placed in the center explicitly, the four part universe is impossible. Thus, Rudavsky’s reading seems unlikely.

shocking that Rambam thinks this is not even true! Indeed, the prophet was not only wrong, but completely off!

Two Schools of Interpretation

Since the publication of the Guide, two schools of thought developed in interpreting the corpus of Maimonidean thought. While these schools developed almost with the very publication of the Guide³⁶, the debate is perhaps typified by two more recent scholars: Leo Strauss³⁷ and Isadore Twersky³⁸.

In the view of the Strauss school, the author of the Guide and of Mishneh Torah might as well have been separate people.³⁹ In the latter, Rambam presents his views for the masses, where-as in the former he presents his actual views. Further, even within the Guide, his true view is often concealed. Rambam says in the introduction to the Guide that he will purposely contradict himself, and Strauss takes this to mean that his actual intent is often the opposite of what he explicitly says. Those in the Strauss camp thus argue that Rambam denies creation, divine will, and providence, despite his elaborate statements defending these ideas.

Strauss further contends that Rambam did not really believe in the premise of the guide that philosophy and Torah are reconcilable at all, and in a sense the whole Guide is an elaborate hoax.⁴⁰ Accordingly, the Maimonidean conception of Ma'aseh Merkavah and Ma'aseh Bereshit, even in the eyes of Rambam himself, was never intended as an authentic interpretation of the rabbinic ideas, and as such its value to both historic and modern Judaism is minimal.

³⁶ For example, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, translator of the Guide, took an approach similar to Strauss, albeit far less extreme.

³⁷ See: Batnitzky, Leora. "Leo Strauss." (2010).

³⁸ Horowitz, Carmi. "Professor Yitzhak Twersky—The Talner Rebbe z" l: A Brief Biography," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 8 (1998): 43-58.

³⁹ See: Strauss, Leo. *The literary character of the Guide for the Perplexed*. Columbia University Press, 1941.

⁴⁰ This is where Strauss diverges from earlier scholars like Ibn Tibbon.

This opinion is fraught with challenges. As shown above, in most important respects, the philosophy of the Guide and Mishneh Torah are in sync. When it comes to his understanding of Merkavah, almost every detail in Mishneh Torah is found in the Guide⁴¹. Thus, it is clear Rambam had already reached philosophical maturity at that stage and indeed much of this maturity can even be traced further back to his Explanation of the Mishneh. It is unfathomable that such a man, who had largely rejected Judaism in favor of philosophy, would devote the best years of his life to writing Mishneh Torah, a halachic work many consider his Magnum Opus. Further, in the Guide he often goes to great pains and displays incredible ingenuity in defending Judaic ideas.⁴²

Twersky, in accordance with a long line of scholars, has developed an opposite understanding. He views Rambam as a staunchly religious man, who, while like any good scholar was not impervious to changing his views over the course of his life, maintained general consistency throughout his philosophical career. He stresses that Rambam must be viewed in light of all his works. In his own words "Not every contradiction automatically signals calculated confusion or esoteric teaching."⁴³ As he explains, often times contradictions have far more pragmatic reasons. Within this view, Rambam firmly believed in his interpretation of the Mishneh in Chagigah. Thus, it is within this approach, and within it alone, that one can ask how accurate the reconstruction is, as according to the first approach, it was never intended to be accurate at all.

Fundamental Issues with Rambam's Position

The Rambam's reconstruction has been attacked from almost all fronts, facing challenges both from within the religious community and without. Attacks from within the religious community accused Rambam of misrepresenting the views of Chazal. His depiction of Chazal as Aristotelian philosophers was viewed as historically inaccurate,

⁴¹ Excluding epicycles/eccentricity, there is perhaps no other difference.

⁴² A spectacular example of this is his defense of creation.

⁴³ Twersky, Isadore. "Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)." (1980). pg 450.

as a projection of his own views onto those of an earlier era. While this contention has been raised by secular critics as well, many of his co-religionists have been equally critical. It is useful to examine two of these critics in particular, the Vilna Gaon (Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna) and Abarbanel. The former rejected Rambam's entire premise wholesale, viewing it as a complete departure from Chazal, while the latter provided a "critique from the inside", that is he delved into the specifics of Rambam's opinion and pointed out its flaws.

While the Vilna Gaon's rejection of Rambam's system is far from the first, it is one of the harshest. After Rabbi Moshe Isserles, in Yoreh Deah 246:4, cites and accepts the opinion of Rambam⁴⁴ as to what the Pardes is (Pardes being a term denoting Ma'aseh Merkavah⁴⁵), the Vilna Gaon scathingly comments:

"But he [Rabbi Isserles] never saw the Pardes, neither him nor Rambam."⁴⁶

The criticism of the Vilna Gaon in part stems from the Gaon's Kabbalistic views. Drawing from the Zohar and Lurianic Mysticism, he viewed the Pardes as something fundamentally different from what Rambam thought, and viewed Rambam as misrepresenting it, "drawn astray by the accursed philosophy"⁴⁷ However, even without taking Lurianic Kabbalah as axiomatic, the Vilna Gaon's critique stands. Chazal as aristotelian philosophers seems both anachronistic and inaccurate. Even more difficult

⁴⁴ In actuality, Rabbi Isserles here, while clearly basing himself on the Rambam, is not presenting Rambam's opinion but his own. He accepts that Rambam was correct about what Pardes means, but views it as something separate from religion, which is why it is only permitted to be studied in an incidental fashion. Contrast this with the Rambam who views this study as the pinnacle, to the point where he makes the controversial statement in Yesodei Hatorah based on Sukkah 28A that it is more important than the study of Halacha. In fact, part of the Vilna Gaon's criticism stems from this presentation of Rabbi Isserles.

⁴⁵ Or according to Rambam both Ma'aseh Merkavah and Bereshit

⁴⁶ Translation my own.

⁴⁷ This being a paraphrase from his comments on Rambam's view on Ayin Harah.

is the depiction of biblical prophets in this fashion, whose worldview was arguably even more removed from Rambam than Chazal.⁴⁸

Perhaps the most comprehensive critic of Rambam is Abarbanel, who composed a list of twenty eight issues with the Rambam's' view of the Merkavah, some of them being quite difficult. It is beyond the scope of this work to discuss all of these issues;⁴⁹ however the more fundamental critiques are⁵⁰:

- 1) How can this vision be identical with what is known via philosophical introspection? The prophets were not philosophers, but obtained their knowledge via prophecy. Further, even if they were philosophers, how can it be that all they knew is obtainable via logical thought? And if this is the case, why are these matters so esoteric?⁵¹ Philosophers discuss them in public with large gatherings!

- 2) The number four is predicated on a placement of the sun which is false. How can the entire prophecy be based on a false premise? Further, Rambam made this idea up; we don't find ancients counting this way, with all the planets in a single sphere. Further, even if they did count this way, there should be five, since there is the all encompassing sphere that contains no stars.

- 3) How can the prophet have said false things? Not only is the number four a problem, but also the doctrine of the sound of the spheres is false as well. This

⁴⁸ Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch similarly criticized Rambam for developing Judaism from without when he should have done so from within. One place this can be found is in Hirsch's Nineteen Letters: Hirsch, Samson Raphael, and Joseph Elias. *The nineteen letters*. Feldheim Publishers, 1995.

⁴⁹ The complete list is available for free here: <https://beta.hebrewbooks.org/14118>

Some of these include:

Why Does Ezekiel describe things in the wrong order? First came spheres, then elements, then intellects!

If the chayot are all identical, each one having the four different faces, how could each one be assigned to a specific element?

⁵⁰ These also correspond with issues 1,3, and 4 in his list.

⁵¹ As Rambam himself notes, this is more problematic when it comes to physics as Ma'aseh Bereshit. See Guide 1:17.

accords with Rambam's position that the description was philosophical introspection and not really prophetic⁵². Even if one admits, as Narbonni does, that prophecy can contain error if the prophet had false traditions from earlier philosophers that he relied upon, that cannot be the case here, since Rambam posits it wasn't prophecy but Ezekiel's introspection.

One might add as well another objection, in a similar vein to the Abarbanel. Why is Rambam so coy in explaining Ezekiel, when all the details of his Metaphysics are explained in great detail elsewhere in the Guide? Further, the main details are even spelled out pretty explicitly in Mishneh Torah! This seems to go beyond the Chapter Heads that the Mishna in Chagigah said where permitted. So either Rambam should not have been so esoteric in his explanation of Ezekiel, or far more esoteric in Mishneh Torah and the first two parts of the Guide!

Aside from the above difficulties, the Rambam's view has implications that, while not problematic to his position, are troubling. Even if one were to take for granted that his reconstruction of the Merkavah was completely accurate, what implications would that have for the modern reader? Rambam's position is based on Aristotelian thought. While Aristotle seemed to be grounded in firm footing during the time in which Rambam was active, today much of Aristotle's thought is dated and disproven. Thus, much of what Rambam identifies as Ma'aseh Merkavah is simply pseudoscience. Particularly problematic are his reliance on Ptolemaic Cosmology. Disbelief in the Celestial Spheres, as well as our current heliocentric model, could not be more fundamentally at odds with the Cosmology of the Guide. This also calls into question his entire conception of angels which follows from the existence of the spheres⁵³, as well as

⁵² Abarbanel understands Guide 3:7 as saying as much, that the vision was in reality introspection.

⁵³ Indeed, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik is quoted as saying that this is one of the weakest points of the Guide. See Kaplan, Lawrence J., ed *Maimonides between Philosophy and Halakhah: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Lectures on the Guide of the Perplexed*.. New York: Ktav Publishing/Urime Publications, 2016.

prophecy, which relied on the notion of the Active Intellect.⁵⁴ Even his proof of God as given in Mishneh Torah and repeated in the Guide relied on the spheres.

Similar problems can be raised against Rambam's view on Ma'aseh Bereshit. Much of it depends on the existence of the four elements, and of the lunar sphere's rotation determining their distribution, neither of which remotely make sense according to modern science.⁵⁵

Further, with the advent of modern science, religious people have started viewing science and religion as two separate domains⁵⁶. For example, the Genesis narrative has stopped being viewed as a precise scientific account, and instead as a religious cosmogony advocating a particular theology. This is very much at odds with the view that Ma'aseh Bereshit is physics.

While this is not a problem with Rambam's position per se, the theological implications of the authentic Jewish esotericism being entirely outdated and fundamentally at odds with modern theological positions must be addressed if we are to take Rambam's position seriously.

The Easy Way Out Does Not Suffice

There is a general approach often used when dealing with the question of the relevance of dated philosophy. It is to assert that the methodology was correct and

⁵⁴ Technically, one could uphold the doctrine of the active intellect without the spheres, but doing so undermines the process of emanation that supposedly flowed through the ten intellects, as without the spheres there would only be one separate intellect. Rabbi Joseph B. Solevechik in *Rambam: Between Philosophy and Halacha*, is quoted as modernizing the Active Intellect to a notion of a divine intellect, although such an interpretation is questionable.

⁵⁵ Another major issue with his identification of Ma'aseh Bereshit with physics is why should physics be esoteric in the first place? While he addresses this difficulty in the Guide, it remains one of the weak points in his theory and deserves further treatment. Rabbi Nissim of Gerona, in *Drashot Haran Drasha 1*, asks this question and poses a solution.

⁵⁶ Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks in his book *The Great Partnership* makes a very strong case for this, viewing the Scholastic alignment of science and religion as a very unfortunate coincidence that polluted religion.

remains important even if many of the conclusions were wrong. Rabbi Chaim Navon, in an article titled “The Rambam's Teachings for Our Generation”, attempts to find relevance in the Guide for the modern era.⁵⁷ While he admits that some specific concepts, such as his ethical statements, remain relevant, most of the relevance is in methodology. Several important methodologies he identifies are appropriate use of biblical allegory, interpretation of Agadot Chazal, and determining what the fundamental positions of Judaism are⁵⁸.

Unfortunately, this approach does not get us very far when it comes to Rambam’s view of Ma’aseh Bereshit and Merkavah, one of his most central doctrines and arguably the focal point of the entire Guide. To maintain that his methodology was correct yet conclusions wrong, one must admit that he was correct in identifying Ma’aseh Bereshit with the physical sciences, and Ma’aseh Merkavah with Metaphysics, even if his science was largely errant. This approach has not dealt with the fundamental issues raised above. Chazal as scientists seems like an anachronistic dubious association. Further, even if Chazal were scientists and Rambam was correct in his identification, accepting his methods but updating his conclusions would place modern physics as Merkavah, a ridiculous conclusion.⁵⁹ The scriptural source of these esoteric traditions further complicates this calculus and does not resolve the fundamental problem that Ezekiel surely knew nothing of modern science. What remains is that accepting the methods but rejecting the conclusions leads to an unsatisfactory depiction of Chazal and the Prophets, and, further, the methods themselves seem anachronistic and non-compelling.

⁵⁷ Navon, Chaim, The Rambam’s Teachings for our Generation

<https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-29-rambams-teachings-our-generation>

⁵⁸ Rabbi Navon in his article actually lists biblical interpretation and Agadot as specific ideas and not methodologies, but it would seem more accurate to categorize them as the latter.

⁵⁹ In ancient times, physics led directly into metaphysics, but today the two are entirely bifurcated, making it very hard to view physics as an essentially esoteric subject matter.

Why Not Reject His Opinion?

Given all the above difficulties, as well as the obvious inadequacy of the general approach used when dealing with outdated philosophy, the reader is likely left wondering why this present work feels any need to provide a response. The following sections will attempt to argue that this position remains relevant, perhaps more than ever. Here is a brief outline of how this argument will be presented:

- 1) Evidence will be brought to demonstrate that in actuality, Rambam's position is far from as anachronistic as it first appears. This will be shown by demonstrating that his position contains far more nuance than presented above, as well as by critically examining primary sources to get a feel for what cosmology Chazal really possessed, and what they thought the Merkavah was.
- 2) The issues raised by Abarbanel will be explored. The 'Straussian' approach of Davies will be found lacking, and an alternative solution will be developed.
- 3) It will be shown that what emerges from the above analysis is that Rambam's position likely reflects what Chazal were thinking and gives us a compelling system for dealing with outdated science in religious literature in general, one that can be recursively applied to Rambam himself, serving to bridge the gaps between Ezekiel, Chazal, Rambam, and the modern reader.

A Closer Read of The Guide: Metaphysics is just the start

While a cursory reading of Rambam has him saying that Ma'aseh Bereshit and Merkavah are Physics and Metaphysics, a closer reading shows that a more nuanced approach is correct. As noted above, he placed the spheres as part of Ma'aseh Bereshit, although they had classically been part of metaphysics⁶⁰. His division is closer

⁶⁰ For an in depth discussion of the division between Physics and Metaphysics in Rambam's thought, see: Kreisel, Howard. "Chapter Two. From Esotericism To Science: The Account Of The Chariot In

to the modern one, where physics encompasses all the physical universe, and metaphysics non-physical beings. However, the distinction is more than that. A close reading of various statements reveals that he viewed metaphysics, that which could be discovered by the human intellect, as part of Ma'aseh Merkavah, but not *all* of it. Perhaps the easiest place to see this is from a key passage in the introduction of the third part of the *Guide* where Rambam explains why he is expounding upon the verses in Ezekiel, despite the warning given in the Mishneh. He writes:

And it has been made clear that even that portion of it that becomes clear to him who has been given access to the understanding of it, is subject to a legal prohibition against its being taught and explained except orally to one man having certain stated qualities, and even to that one only the chapter headings may be mentioned. This is the reason why the knowledge of this matter has ceased to exist in the entire religious community, so that nothing great or small remains of it. And it had to happen like this, for this knowledge was only transmitted from one chief to another and has never been set down in writing. If this is so, what stratagem can I use to draw attention toward that which may have appeared to me as indubitably clear, manifest, and evident in my opinion, according to what I have understood in these matters? On the other hand, if I had omitted setting down something of that which has appeared to me as clear, so that that knowledge would perish when I perish, as is inevitable, I should have considered that conduct as extremely cowardly with regard to you and everyone who is perplexed. It would have been, as it were, robbing one who deserves the truth of the truth, or begrudging an heir his inheritance. And both those traits are blameworthy. On the other hand, as has been stated before, an explicit exposition of this knowledge is denied by a legal prohibition, in addition to that which is imposed by judgment. In addition to this there is the fact that in that which has occurred to me with regard to these matters, I followed conjecture and

Maimonidean Philosophy Till The End Of The Thirteenth Century." In *The Cultures of Maimonideanism*, pp. 21-56. Brill, 2009.

supposition; no divine revelation has come to me to teach me that the intention in the matter in question was such and such, nor did I receive what I believe in these matters from a teacher. But the texts of the prophetic books and the dicta of the Sages, together with the speculative premises that I possess, showed me that things are indubitably so and so. Yet it is possible that they are different and that something else is intended.

This passage provides several key insights⁶¹. His statement of sources is quite significant. Were he to view Ma'aseh Merkavah as merely a restatement of metaphysics, he hardly would need scripture and Rabbinic statements to reconstruct this knowledge. From this phrase alone, one could argue that indeed he believed metaphysics to be the complete corpus of this knowledge, and his use of scripture and Chazal was merely to verify that this indeed is what was referred to as Ma'aseh Merkavah. However, this reading cannot be correct for several reasons.

First, he implies that his use of philosophy here was in methodology, not in content, when he says “the texts of the prophetic books and the dicta of the Sages, together with the speculative premises that I possess, showed me that things are indubitably so.” Philosophy is a premise, but the body of knowledge is from Scripture and Chazal.

Second, Rambam is very concerned that when he dies, his reconstruction would be lost forever. This is quite significant. Were the entire corpus of Ma'aseh Merkavah to be contained in Greek Metaphysics, and his role is simply as an interpreter of verses and Rabbinic statements to accomplish this synthesis, this concern seems highly unwarranted. While such a synthesis may be challenging, it hardly seems accurate to say that it was in any danger of getting lost. Metaphysics was a prominent field in Rambam's day, and there were no shortage of capable biblical interpreters. It is clear that he viewed his reconstruction not merely as taking Greek Metaphysics and inserting

⁶¹ In stating that this knowledge had entirely disappeared, he rejects the Hekhalot, of which he was undoubtedly aware. Moshe Idel argues that this statement served as a catalyst for the first Kabbalistic writings. See: Idel, Moshe. "Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed and the Kabbalah." *Jewish History* 18, no. 2-3 (2004): 197-226.

it into the Bible, but as taking the methods of the former and applying them to the text of the latter to obtain something greater than either one alone.

A similar statement of philosophy being only a means to understand scripture, is found in Guide 2:2:

Know that my purpose in this Treatise of mine was not to compose something on natural science, or to make an epitome of notions pertaining to the divine science according to some doctrines, or to demonstrate what has been demonstrated in them. Nor was my purpose in this Treatise I to give a summary and epitomized description of the disposition of the spheres, or to make known their number. For the books composed concerning these matters are adequate. If, however, they should turn out not to be adequate with regard to some subject, that which I shall say concerning that subject will not be superior to everything else that has been said about it. My purpose in this Treatise, as I have informed you in its introduction is only to elucidate the difficult points of the Law and to make manifest the true realities of its hidden meanings, which the multitude cannot be made to understand because of these matters being too high for it. Hence if you perceive that I speak about the establishment of the existence of the separate intellects and about their number, or about the number of the spheres and the causes of their motions, or about investigating the true reality of the notion of matter and form, or about the notion of divine overflow and about other such notions, you ought not to think and it ought not to occur to you that I intended only to investigate the true reality of that particular philosophic notion. For these notions have been expounded in many books, and the correctness of most of them has been demonstrated. I only intend to mention matters, the understanding of which may elucidate some difficulty of the Law; in fact, many knots will be unraveled through the knowledge of a notion of which I give an epitome. Now you know already from the introduction of this my Treatise that it hinges on the explanation of what can be understood in the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot and the clearing-up of the difficulties attaching to prophecy and to the knowledge of the deity. Accordingly in whatever chapter you find me discoursing with a view to explaining a matter already

demonstrated in natural science, or a matter demonstrated in divine science, or an opinion that has been shown to be the one fittest to be believed in, or a matter attaching to what has been explained in mathematics - know that that particular matter necessarily must be a key to the understanding of something to be found in the books of prophecy, I mean to say of some of their parables and secrets. The reason why I mentioned, explained, and elucidated that matter would be found in the knowledge it procures us of the Account of the Chariot or of the Account of the Beginning or would be found in an explanation that it furnishes of some root regarding the notion of prophecy or would be found in the explanation of some root regarding the belief in a true opinion belonging to the beliefs of Law.

One of the Abarbanel's difficulties with Rambam's position points in this direction as well. Abarbanel noted how difficult it is to imagine that the prophecy contained no insight not available via introspection. Indeed, the notion that Merkavah is exactly Metaphysics and nothing more, borders on ridiculous. If the entirety of Ma'aseh Merkavah is intelligible through human reason alone, to what end is scripture? Surely the purpose of prophetic experience is to give insights beyond what the intellect alone is capable of. In fact, Rambam says as much in the Guide's introduction⁶²:

⁶² A similar statement can be found in his introduction to the Explanation of the Mishneh (translation by Rabbi Francis Nataf):

“But that which was created by Divine crafting and natural wisdom – for example, types of trees and grasses and types of quarries in the ground and types of stones and types of animals – there are some of them for which the purpose of their existence is hidden and no one knows it at all; unless it is made known by prophecy or with the power to know the future, but it is impossible with rational investigation. [This is] because it is not within man's ability to investigate to the point that he will understand and know for what reason nature produced some ants with wings and some without wings; and the reason it also produced [insects] with many legs and others with few legs; and what is the purpose of this [insect] and that ant. But with things that are larger than this – [that] their action is more revealed – however, the advantage of the men of wisdom in knowing the purpose of their creation is revealed. And according to one being wiser and [more] impassioned and of clear thought, so will his knowledge be more complete. And

You should not think that these great secrets are fully and completely known to anyone among us. They are not. But sometimes truth flashes out to us so that we think that it is day, and then matter and habit in their various forms conceal it so that we find ourselves again in an obscure night, almost as we were at first. We are like someone in a very dark night over whom lightning flashes time and time again. Among us there is one for whom the lightning flashes time and time again, so that he is always, as it were, in unceasing light. Thus night appears to him as day. That is the degree of the great one among the prophets, to whom it was said: *But as for thee, stand thou here by Me*⁶³, and of whom it was said: *that the skin of his face sent forth beams*⁶⁴, and so on.

We find this principle affirmed more explicitly in Guide 2:38 as well:

Know that the true prophets indubitably grasp speculative matters; by means of his speculation alone, man is unable to grasp the causes from which what a prophet has come to know necessarily follows. This has a counterpart in their giving information regarding matters with respect to which man, using only common conjecture and divination, is unable to give information.

Regarding the superiority of prophetic knowledge he further states in 2:23:

therefore, when the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to Shlomo the wisdom He promised him, he knew from the secrets of the creation of these types that are possible for a person to know, [but only] inasmuch as he is a person. And he spoke about the purpose of the creation of trees and grasses and types of life, as Scripture stated (I Kings 5:13), "He spoke about trees, from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall; and he spoke about beasts, birds, creeping things, and fishes." And this was testimony that he had a Divine spirit within him. And it stated afterward, "And they came from all of the nations to hear Solomon's wisdom."

⁶³ Deut. 5:31

⁶⁴ Exod. 34:29

Be therefore always suspicious in your mind as to this point and accept the authority of the two prophets who are the pillars of the well-being of the human species.

When discussing Ma'aseh Bereshit in the Guide's introduction, he clearly says that the role of scripture is to explain mysteries to man that are beyond his comprehension:

This is so since natural science borders on divine science, and its study precedes that of divine science in time as has been made clear to whoever has engaged in speculation on these matters. Hence God, may He be exalted, caused His book to open with the Account of the Beginning, which, as we have made clear, is natural science. And because of the greatness and importance of the subject and because our capacity falls short of apprehending the greatest of subjects as it really is, we are told about those profound matters - which divine wisdom has deemed necessary to convey to us - in parables and riddles and in very obscure words. As [the Sages], may their memory be blessed, have said: It is impossible to tell mortals of the power of the Account of the Beginning. For this reason Scripture tells you obscurely: *In the beginning God created*⁶⁵, and so on. They thus have drawn your attention to the fact that the above-mentioned subjects are obscure. You likewise know Solomon's saying: *That which is far off, and exceeding deep; who can find it out?*⁶⁶ That which is said about all this is in equivocal terms so that the multitude might comprehend them in accord with the capacity of their understanding and the weakness of their representation, whereas the perfect man, who is already informed, will comprehend them otherwise.

Further, Abarbanel was bothered by what was so esoteric about this subject matter. At that time both physics and metaphysics were well known sciences and not

⁶⁵ Genesis 1:1.

⁶⁶ Eccles. 7:24.

very esoteric. Aristotle's works, with commentaries, were readily available. It simply does not make sense that this would be the knowledge Rambam was hiding.

This difficulty is magnified by the observation that his treatment of metaphysics throughout the guide is far from esoteric, and even in Mishneh Torah he describes the basic system quite explicitly. All of these difficulties are resolved by the reading suggested in the passage above, namely that metaphysics is a set of principles by which to understand the Merkavah, not it itself. Or to put it another way, metaphysics is Roshei Perakim, the chapter heads with which one is given the tools to understand the Merkavah on his own. That is why, in his discussion of Ezekiel, which is his own version of Roshei Perakim in a way, he explains the correspondence between metaphysics and Ezekiel's vision, but leaves the implications of this, the true Merkavah, up to the reader to discern, and does not address them at all. This is bolstered by his statements in Mishneh Torah Yesodei Hatorah 2:11-12, which comes after his description of Ma'aseh Merkavah:

These matters we spoke of on this subject in these two chapters, are but a drop in the ocean of what it ought to be expounded in this subject; and the exposition of all the principles in these two chapters, are known as the Works of the Chariot.

The ancient sages have commanded not to sermonize concerning these matters, save only to one man at a time, if he be wise, possessed of an intelligence of his own, whenafter to him might be transmitted the headlines of the chapters and acquaint him with a fraction of the matter so that he be able to understand its conclusion by his own intelligence and fathom its depth. These matters are extremely deep matters indeed, and not each and every intelligence is prepared to suffer them. And concerning them Solomon in his wisdom metaphorically said: "The lambs will be for thy clothing" (Prov. 27,26); so have the sages interpreted this metaphor: "matters which are covering the universe shall be for thy garment," meaning they are a garment for thee alone, but thou shalt not sermonize them before the multitude. And, concerning them he further said: "Let it be for thee alone and for no strangers with thee," (Ibid. 5,17). And concerning them he, moreover, said: "Milk and honey shall be beneath thy tongue;" (Song of

Songs, 4,11); so have the early sages interpreted it: "Matters which are likened to honey and milk shall remain beneath thine own tongue".⁶⁷

This statement makes it quite clear that the chapters preceding this, with their description of the intellects, falls under the rubric of chapter heads. He says these chapters are a mere "drop in the ocean", yet they contain all the major points of his metaphysics, demonstrating this thesis. Indeed, even without this statement, the very placement of these first four chapters in Mishneh Torah, a work intended for the masses, testifies to the fact that they constitute nothing more than chapter heads. A similar statement is found at the end of chapter 4, laws 10 and 11:

All these matters we spoke of on this subject are but a drop in the bucket, and they are very deep matters; but are not of the same depth as the subject in chapters I and II. The exposition of all these matters in chapters III and IV is called Cosmogony. Thus did the ancient sages charge not to sermonize on these matters before the multitude, but to impart them to one man and instruct him therein.

And, wherein is the difference between the subject of Works of the Chariot and the subject of Cosmogony? The subject of Works of the Chariot shall not be imparted even to an individual unless he be a scholar endowed with a reasoning power of his own, and then only the epitomes of each chapter may be transmitted to him; whereas the subject of Cosmogony may be imparted to an individual, even though not endowed with a reasoning power of his own, and it is permissible to teach him all that he is capable of knowing concerning these matters. If so, why not give public instructions therein? Because not every man is endowed with broad understanding to construe the explanation and elucidation of all the text correctly.

⁶⁷ All translations of Mishneh Torah are from:

Glazer, Simon. Book of Mishnah Torah Yod Ha-Hazakah Volume 1 (1927)

Clearly, the first four chapters serve as a methodological introduction to studying Merkavah and Bereshit⁶⁸, but do not constitute their actual depth. This is why it was allowed to be included in Mishneh Torah, and why it was described in detail in the Guide without apology, even though the verse by verse commentary on Ezekiel had much apology and was far more vague.

It thus emerges from a close reading of the Guide and Mishneh Torah, that Metaphysics and Physics are in reality the chapter heads to the real secret. They are the tool with which the rest can be understood. One must combine the principles and knowledge of Metaphysics with scriptural (i.e. prophetic) and rabbinic traditions to get the full picture.⁶⁹ Rambam in his esoteric caution, presents these tools, which are the chapter heads of the merkavah, in chapter heads themselves.

Were Chazal Really Philosophers?

As mentioned above, one of the weak points of Rambam's reconstruction is its premise that the Talmudic and Mishnaic sages were philosophers. This is an obvious necessity of his position, which hinges upon the Mishnah and Talmud referring to philosophical concepts. This is a notion that seems anachronistic at first glance, but upon closer examination of the nuance of his position, actually emerges as quite compelling.

The word 'philosopher' is a very loaded term, especially in the times of Rambam, when it referred to the Aristotelian tradition,⁷⁰ often incorporating Neoplatonic elements⁷¹. If one takes the term in its loaded meaning, Rambam is essentially asserting that Chazal were philosophers in exactly the same way he was. However, a closer look at key passages in the Guide and other writings of Rambam will

⁶⁸ As he said in the introduction to part 3.

⁶⁹ This analysis is a boon to the school that takes Rambam at face value, and poses challenges to the Strauss school.

⁷⁰ See Vincent, Spade Paul. "Medieval Philosophy, w." (2013).

⁷¹ See Wildberg, Christian. "Neoplatonism." (2016).

demonstrate that this loaded definition is incorrect. By calling Chazal philosophers, Rambam means nothing more than “people engaged in speculative thought.”

Rambam is well aware that Chazal did not seem especially philosophical, so he proposes that this tradition was lost. In Guide 2:11 he offers the following defense:

We have already explained that all these views do not contradict anything said by our prophets and the sustainers of our Law. For our community is a community that is full of knowledge and is perfect, as He, may He be exalted, has made clear through the intermediary of the Master who made us perfect, saying: Surely, this great community is a wise and understanding people. However, when the wicked from among the ignorant communities ruined our good qualities, destroyed our words of wisdom and our compilations, and caused our men of knowledge to perish, so that we again became ignorant, as we had been threatened because of our sins - for it says: And the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid; when, furthermore, we mingled with these communities and their opinions were taken over by us, as were their morals and actions - for just as it says regarding the similarity of actions: They mingled themselves with the communities and learned their works, it says with regard to the adoption by us of the opinions of the ignorant: And they please themselves in the children of strangers, which is translated by Jonathan ben Uziel, peace be on him: And they walk according to the laws of the gentiles; when, in consequence of all this, we grew up accustomed to the opinions of the ignorant, these philosophic views appeared to be, as it were, foreign to our Law, just as they are foreign to the opinions of the ignorant. However, matters are not like this.

He further explains in 1:71 that one can find hints to this tradition in Rabbinic statements, but that they are like a husk without a kernel:

Know that the many sciences devoted to establishing the truth regarding these matters that have existed in our religious community have perished because of

the length of the time that has passed, because of our being dominated by the pagan nations, and because, as we have made clear, it is not permitted to divulge these matters to all people. For the only thing it is permitted to divulge to all people are the texts of the books. You already know that even the legalistic science of law was not put down in writing in the olden times because of the precept, which is widely known in the nation: Words that I have communicated to you orally, you are not allowed to put down in writing. This precept shows extreme wisdom with regard to the Law. For it was meant to prevent what has ultimately come about in this respect: I mean the multiplicity of opinions, the variety of schools, the confusions occurring in the expression of what is put down in writing, the negligence that accompanies what is written down, the divisions of the people, who are separated into sects, and the production of confusion with regard to actions. All these matters should be within the authority of the Great Court of Law, as we have made clear in our juridical compilations and as the text of the Torah shows. Now if there was insistence that the legalistic science of law should not, in view of the harm that would be caused by such a procedure, be perpetuated in a written compilation accessible to all the people, all the more could none of the mysteries of the Torah have been set down in writing and be made accessible to the people. On the contrary they were transmitted by a few men belonging to the elite to a few of the same kind, just as I made clear to you from their saying: The mysteries of the Torah may only be transmitted to a counsellor, wise in crafts, and so on. This was the cause that necessitated the disappearance of these great roots of knowledge from the nation. For you will not find with regard to them anything except slight indications and pointers occurring in the Talmud and the Midrashim. These are, as it were, a few grains belonging to the core, which are overlaid by many layers of rind, so that people were occupied with these layers of rind and thought that beneath them there was no core whatever.

Rambam leaves it quite open as to when in history this tradition was lost. His scriptural allusions imply that some of this knowledge had already been lost in biblical

times, where as his mishnaic quotes imply that this tradition was lost during the Talmudic and Geonic periods. Perhaps he means to say it was a long gradual process. Regardless, most important is the portrayal of earlier authorities, both biblical figures and Chazal, as philosophers. These passages are probably the most explicit cause of his readers thinking that Rambam viewed Chazal as Aristotleans. However, ignoring the loaded meaning of 'philosopher', nothing he writes in any way implies any suggestion of this. He asserts that despite the preoccupation of Chazalic sources with the Law, they too engaged in speculative studies that are compatible with the philosophy of his day. No statement says at all that they engaged in speculation from a perspective identical to his own.

Granted, the above passage leaves both possibilities open, but there are several strong reasons to favor the 'unloaded' interpretation.

The first of these is from a general estimation of Rambam as a scholar. As noted above, the holistic painting of Chazal as Aristotelian philosophers is both anachronistic and non-compelling, and it is very hard to imagine an excellent scholar like Rambam, familiar with the entire corpus of Chazal, was unaware of this.⁷²

Second, there is a very important point that many readers of the Guide have ignored, either deliberately or otherwise. It is a great principle of all Maimonidean interpreters that he wrote the Guide and Mishneh Torah for separate audiences, indeed Rambam says as much. However, this is often taken to mean that his true opinion is found in the Guide, whereas the Mishneh Torah was what he wanted the masses to believe. There is a far more compelling thesis that has been largely ignored: The Mishneh Torah was the face he gave the masses, the Guide the philosophers, but his true opinion may well have been somewhere in the middle. The introductory letter to the Guide, as well as its very name, indicates an apologetic aspect. Much as how many philosophical statements in Mishneh Torah are oversimplified due to the nature of the work, It is not unlikely that he painted Chazal in a more philosophical light in the Guide

⁷² It should be noted that in Rambam' view, Aristotelian Science was proven beyond a doubt to be correct, which does make his assertion that Chazal were aware of it far more plausible. Still, it seems unreasonable even from this perspective to think all the Rabbis were literal Aristotelians, especially considering the many non-rationalist elements of the Talmud.

to ease the perplexity of his student, oversimplifying the situation for the sake of his purpose, even though he understood the issue to contain more nuance. When writing for a philosophical audience, perplexed by the lack thereof in rabbinic literature, strong statements to the effect of “Talmudic Sages were philosophers” is exactly what his perplexed readers needed to hear.

Indeed, Rambam explicitly tells his readers this! In the Guide’s introduction, he lists seven causes of contradiction, adding that types five and seven are to be found in the Guide. The seventh type, deliberate esotericism, has been over-exploited by Strauss and his school, but oddly the fifth type has been largely ignored. It states:

The fifth cause arises from the necessity of teaching and making someone understand. For there may be a certain obscure matter that is difficult to conceive. One has to mention it or to take it as a premise in explaining something that is easy to conceive and that by rights ought to be taught before the former, since one always begins with what is easier. The teacher, accordingly, will have to be lax and, using any means that occur to him or gross speculation, will try to make that first matter somehow understood. He will not undertake to state the matter as it truly is in exact terms, but rather will leave it so in accord with the listener's imagination that the latter will understand only what he now wants him to understand. Afterwards, in the appropriate place, that obscure matter is stated in exact terms and explained as it truly is.

Thus, it is quite possible that his assessment of Chazal as philosophers, even if taken in its loaded sense, may be a deliberate overstatement. There are many examples on the Guide and elsewhere where he seems to indicate a far more nuanced approach to Chazal’s speculative activities, much as we would expect if he was applying the fifth method. His true opinion seems to have two significant modifications:

- 1) Some of Chazal engaged in speculation, but far from all of them. Chazal contained a multiplicity of voices, and indeed some of these voices were downright anti-philosophical. As a result, it is not correct to conclude that none of them were philosophical based on anti-rationalist statements contained in the

Talmud and elsewhere. Moreover, even some of their philosophical statements contrast strongly with Rambam's views.

- 2) Their speculation was not always systematic like Rambam's own, and employed different methods. For example, it was less proof based.

Only some of Chazal engaged in speculation:

In the above passages, it is never stated that all sages were philosophers. Indeed, the Talmud in Chagigah conveys the impression that not all talmudic sages were deemed worthy of studying the Merkavah, implying they did not possess the requisite background. In general, the esoterism of the topic leads to the conclusion that only some of the sages were engaged in it.

Further, in several places, Rambam admits that there were some sages who held decidedly anti-philosophical positions. For example, in his letter to Lunel, he writes:

“The summary of the matter is that our mind cannot grasp how the decrees of the Holy One, blessed be He, work upon human beings in this world and in the world to come. What we have said about this from the beginning is that the entire position of the star gazers is regarded as a falsehood by all men of science. I know that you may search and find sayings of some individual sages in the Talmud and Midrashim whose words appear to maintain that at the moment of a man's birth, the stars will cause such and such to happen to him. Do not regard this as a difficulty, for it is not fitting for a man to abandon the prevailing law and raise once again the counterarguments and replies (that preceded its enactment). Similarly, it is not proper to abandon matters of reason that have already been verified by proofs, shake loose of them, and depend on the words of a single one of the sages⁷³ from whom possibly the matter was hidden. Or

⁷³ Once again, it is possible he painted this as a more minority opinion than it actually was due to the nature of the letter, intended to strengthen the faith of its recipients. Regardless, he clearly (rightfully so!) understood at least some of Chazal were of this opinion, but that it was wrong to classify all of them in this light.

there may be an allusion in those words; or they may have been said with a view to the times and the business before him. (You surely know how many of the verses of the holy Law are not to be taken literally. Since it is known through proofs of reason that it is impossible for the thing to be literally so, the translator [of the Aramaic Targum] rendered it in a form that reason will abide.) A man should never cast his reason behind him, for the eyes are set in front, not in back."⁷⁴

Elsewhere, he decries the belief in magic and demons, despite statements in the Talmud suggesting such a belief. In Hilchot Avodah Zarah 11:16 he writes:

All of these things are false and spurious, and it was with such that the ancient idolaters misled the peoples of many lands so that they would follow them. And it is unbecoming to Israel who are exceedingly wise to be attracted by these absurdities, nor to even imagine that they are of any consequence, even as it is said: "For there is no enchantment with Jacob, neither is there any divination with Israel" (Num. 23.23); and it is again said: "For these nations that thou art to dispossess, hearken unto soothsayers and unto diviners, but as for thee the Lord thy God hath not suffered thee so to do" (Deut. 18.14). Whosoever believes in these matters, and their like, and suppose that there is wisdom and truth in them, save that the Torah disallowed them, such are none other save from among the foolish and ignorant and are to be included among women and children whose mind is not sound. But wise and sound-minded people know that all these matters which the Torah disallowed are not matters of wisdom but formless nonsense followed by senseless people for the sake of which they abandoned every path of truth. Even because thereof the Torah, in admonishing against all these vanities, commanded, saying: "Perfect shalt thou be with the Lord thy God" (Ibid. 18.13)

⁷⁴ Translation by Twersky, Isadore, ed. *A Maimonides reader*. Behrman House, Incorporated, 1972.

Available online here: <http://people.bu.edu/dklepper/RN242/rambam2.html>

When commenting on the Mishneh in Avodah Zarah 4:7, he laments how many sages were of this incorrect belief.

There are several other cases where he found anti-philosophical statements of Chazal to be abhorrent. In Guide 3:31, he cites the opinion that one is forbidden to inquire into the reasons for the divine commandments, and writes:

There is a group of human beings who consider it a grievous thing that causes should be given for any law; what would please them most is that the intellect would not find a meaning for the commandments and prohibitions. What compels them to feel thus is a sickness that they find in their souls, a sickness to which they are unable to give utterance and of which they cannot furnish a satisfactory account. For they think that if those laws were useful in this existence and had been given to us for this or that reason, it would be as if they derived from the reflection and the understanding of some intelligent being. If, however, there is a thing for which the intellect could not find any meaning at all and that does not lead to something useful, it indubitably derives from God; for the reflection of man would not lead to such a thing. It is as if, I according to these people of weak intellects, man were more perfect than his Maker

Later, in 3:48, he identifies this opinion as one of two explanations found in Berachot of why one is forbidden to say “God’s mercy reaches even the birds.”

You must not allege as an objection against me the dictum of [the Sages], may their memory be blessed: He who says: Thy mercy extendeth to young birds, and so on.⁷⁵ For this is one of the two opinions mentioned by us - I mean the opinion of those who think that there is no reason for the Law except only the will [of God] - but as for us, we follow only the second opinion.

⁷⁵ Ber. 33b

Similarly, in Guide 2:29, he strongly decries that the sages ever claimed the world would end, and asserts that even if the Talmud says this, the opinion is in the minority⁷⁶:

The notion toward which we are driving has already been made clear; namely, that the passing-away of this world, a change of the state in which it is, or a thing's changing its nature and with that the permanence of this change, are not affirmed in any prophetic text or in any statement of the Sages either. For when the latter say, The world lasts six thousand years, and one thousand years it is a waste, they do not have in mind total extinction of being. For his expression, and one thousand years it is a waste, indicates that time remains. Besides, it is the saying of an individual that corresponds to a certain manner of thinking. On the other hand, you constantly find as the opinion of all Sages and as a foundation on which every one among the Sages of the Mishneh and the Sages of the Talmud bases his proofs, his saying: There is nothing new under the sun, and the view that nothing new will be produced in any respect or from any cause whatever

In other cases, there were even statements of the sages that address questions which Rambam viewed as decidedly philosophical in nature, but which he found disturbing. For example in 3:17, when discussing divine justice, he rejects the doctrine⁷⁷ found in the talmud of "Afflictions of Love."

However, in the discourse of the Sages, there occurs something additional over and above what is to be found in the text of the Torah, namely, the dictum of some of them regarding the sufferings of love.⁷⁸ For according to this opinion, sometimes misfortunes befall an individual not because of his having sinned

⁷⁶ Even though no other opinion is given there!

⁷⁷ Once again, even though the principle presented is not contested in the Talmud.

⁷⁸ Berachot 5a.

before, but in order that his reward should be greater. This is also the teaching of the Mu'tazila. But there is no text in the Torah expressing this notion.

Another example is in 2:26 when he discusses the various opinions regarding creation. In reference to the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer regarding the eternity of matter, he writes:

All in all, this statement will confuse very much indeed the belief of a learned man who adheres to the Law. No persuasive figurative interpretation with regard to it has become clear to me.

Not only did Rambam think the Talmud contained a multiplicity of deeply contrasting viewpoints within Chazal⁷⁹, he was also aware that it contained an editorial layer with a bias of its own. This is seen in a responsum⁸⁰ where the give and take of the gemara is ignored in favor of what he deems the correct opinion, demonstrating his awareness of what modern scholars call the *stam* layer of the Talmud⁸¹, whose interpretive conclusions are not always necessarily in accordance with the views of those whom they are interpreting,⁸² a nuanced position completely backed by modern Talmudic scholarship.⁸³ This awareness is particularly important to the subject at hand. Rambam believed that a large part of the Merkavah tradition was lost somewhere between the Tannaim and Geonim. This assertion implies that that time period was decidedly not

⁷⁹ Contrast this with the view of the Tosafists, who take every Talmudic statement as authoritative and assume no contradiction is possible. Granted, this is an oversimplification of their view, which was brilliant and rigorous in its own right, but useful as a contrast.

⁸⁰ Shilat, Isaac. *Igrot Harambam*, (1994) page 506-507.

⁸¹ While modern scholarship likes to give the impression that this is their invention, the idea is well documented in traditional sources, albeit under the name Savoraim.

⁸² That is, he displays an awareness of the Talmud's editorial layer, the Savoraim, or what academic Talmudists call the *Stam*.

⁸³ Indeed, this is more or less the central thesis of academic scholarship.

See: Wald, Stephen G. "Talmud, Babylonian." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Farmington Hill, MI: Keter Publishing House (2007).

Halivni, David Weiss. *The formation of the Babylonian Talmud*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

philosophic, and that people in those times were less engaged in speculation than their predecessors. This would make the generation of Talmud's editors a particularly non philosophic one, which lends him more leeway in dismissing the Talmud's anti rationalist statements as non representative of the sages.

Their Speculation Employed different methods:

There are several reasons to posit that Rambam truly believed Chazal employed very different methods to his own. In the introduction to the Guide, he makes it clear that their speculation was far less systematic. His sixth cause of contradiction is:

The sixth cause. The contradiction is concealed and becomes evident only after many premises. The greater the number of premises needed to make the contradiction evident, the more concealed it is. It thus may escape the author, who thinks there is no contradiction between his two original propositions. But if each proposition is considered separately- a true premise being joined to it and the necessary conclusion drawn - and this is done to every conclusion -a true premise being joined to it and the necessary conclusion drawn -, after many syllogisms the outcome of the matter will be that the two final conclusions are contradictory or contrary to each other. That is the kind of thing that escapes the attention of scholars who write books. If, however, the two original propositions are evidently contradictory, but the author has simply forgotten the first when writing down the second in another part of his compilation, this is a very great weakness, and that man should not be reckoned among those whose speeches deserve consideration.

Further along in the introduction he writes:

As for the divergences occurring in the books of the philosophers, or rather of those who know the truth, they are due to the fifth cause. On the other hand, the contradictions occurring in most of the books of authors and commentators other

than those we have mentioned are due to the sixth cause. Likewise in the Midrashim and the Haggadah there is to be found great contradiction due to this cause. That is why the Sages have said: No questions should be asked about difficulties in the Haggadah.

Not only are Midrash and Agada contrasted with “true philosophers”, but they are described as having the form of contradiction which is found in non-systematic speculation.

There is another place where this is implied. In many places, Rambam makes clear that knowledge of physics is a prerequisite for metaphysical knowledge. One who reads through portions of the Guide thoroughly gets this impression when many principles of metaphysics, such as the intellects of the spheres, are only knowable based on significant knowledge of his physics. However, one need not rely on this impression; he says as much explicitly. In the introduction to the Guide, regarding Ma'aseh Bereshit, he writes:

there is a close connection between these matters and the divine science, and they too are secrets of that divine science.

He further writes there:

This, in its turn, cannot come about except through divine science, and this divine science cannot become actual except after a study of natural science. This is so since natural science borders on divine science, and its study precedes that of divine science in time as has been made clear to whoever has engaged in speculation on these matters. Hence God, may He be exalted, caused. His book to open with the Account of the Beginning, which, as we have made clear, is natural science.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ See also 1:34 where, in the midst of a larger discussion regarding the prerequisites of metaphysics, he stresses the importance of studying physics before metaphysics.

However, there is evidence that Chazal did not follow this systematic ordering, based on a passage in Chagigah 13b:

Rav Yosef would study the Design of the Divine Chariot and was familiar with the subject, whereas the Elders of Pumbedita would study the act of Creation. They said to Rav Yosef: Let the Master teach us the Design of the Divine Chariot. He said to them: You teach me the act of Creation. After they taught him that subject, they said to him: Let the Master teach us the Design of the Divine Chariot. He said to them: We learned with regard to them the secrets of the Torah: "Honey and milk are under your tongue" (Song of Songs 4:11), meaning that matters that are sweeter than honey and milk should remain under your tongue.⁸⁵

Rambam himself quotes this passage in his introduction to the Mishneh to demonstrate a different point, but does not seem surprised that some of the Rabbis were viewed as experts in metaphysics despite lacking knowledge of physics. Here is his paraphrase of the passage:

And likewise, some of the sages did not want to reveal the secrets of wisdom to some [other sages]. And they already mentioned (Chagigah 13a) that an honored man of the sages initiated with men who were experts in the wisdom of the Story of Creation (maaseh bereishit) whereas he was an expert in the Story of the Chariot (Ma'aseh Merkavah): He said to them, "Teach me the Story of Creation and I will teach you the Story of the Chariot"; and they said to him, "The matter is good." And when they taught him the Story of Creation, he abstained from teaching them the Story of the Chariot. And God forbid that he did this because of an evil heart to prevent [them from] wisdom or to have an advantage over them; as these traits are ugly in one of the silly ones – all the more so, with these honored pious ones. Rather, he did this thing because he saw himself to be

⁸⁵ All quotes from the Talmud are taken from: Steinsaltz, A., T. Hersh Weinreb, S. Z. Berger, and J. Schreier. "Koren Talmud Bavli." *Jerusalem, Israel: Koren Publishers* (2012).

Note, this translation often strays from literalism to make the English flow better, but it suffices for our purposes.

fitting to receive that which was with them and that they were not fitting to receive that which was with him.⁸⁶

This exact idea, the inversion of studying Celestial physics before terrestrial physics, is expressed in Guide 3:5, this time regarding not Chazal but the Prophets. There, Rambam is dealing with an exegetical problem. Ezekiel's vision starts with the Chayot, then Ophanim, and finally Chashmal. Based on the Rambam's understanding that the Ophanim are the elements, Chayot Spheres, and Chashmal intellects⁸⁷, one would have expected either Ophanim followed by Chayot and then Chashmal, starting from lowest to highest, or the opposite, from cause to emanation. He explains this order as follows:

You ought also to have your attention directed to the order of these I three apprehensions. Thus he has put first the apprehension of the living creatures, for they come first because of their nobility and of their causality - according to what he says: For the air of the living creature was in the wheels- and because of other things too. After the wheels comes the third apprehension, which is higher in degree than that of the living creatures, as is clear. The reason for this lies in the fact that the first two apprehensions necessarily precede the third apprehension in the order of knowledge, the latter being inferred with the help of the other two.

As Daniel Davies notes⁸⁸ this does not in any way explain why Chayot preceded Ophanim, given that according to the Rambam, their study comes first. Rambam in a subtle way is indicating that Ezekiel himself inverted the order, much as Rav Yosef did.

⁸⁶ Rabbi Francis Nataf, *Rambam Introduction to Mishnah*, (2017)

⁸⁷ This is a bit of an oversimplification. The connection between the man above the Chayot and Chashmal is complex.

⁸⁸ Davies, Daniel. *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

A further implication of this is that he viewed the speculation of Chazal and the Prophets as being less proof-based, since most metaphysical proofs rely on extensive knowledge of physics.

Angels as a Paradigm of Different Methodologies

One of the most difficult passages in Yesodei Hatorah is his cryptic discussion of angels in the second chapter. Rambam in the Guide identifies the ten separate intellects with angels, as did Al Farabi. This can be found many times. Guide 2:2 states:

Now I think it fit that I should complete the exposition of the opinions of the philosophers, that I should explain their proofs concerning the existence of separate intellects, and that I should explain the concordance of this opinion with the foundations of our Law-I refer to what the Law teaches concerning the existence of angels.⁸⁹

And in 2:3:

Know that though the opinions held by Aristotle regarding the causes of the motion of the spheres - from which opinions he deduced the existence of separate intellects - are simple assertions for which no demonstration has been made, yet they are, of all the opinions put forward on this subject, those that are exposed to the smallest number of doubts and those that are the most suitable for being put into a coherent order, just as Alexander says in "The Principles of the All." These sayings also are in harmony with many sayings of the Law and more particularly, with what is explained in the generally known Midrashim, about whose having been composed by the Sages there is no doubt, as I shall explain. I therefore shall set forth his opinions and his proofs, so that I may cull from them what agrees with the Law and corresponds to the sayings of the Sages, may their memory be blessed.

⁸⁹ This idea is repeated in Guide 2:6.

Rambam was well aware that Chazal ascribed to a seven sphere cosmology.⁹⁰ Further, he thought Ezekiel had a four sphere cosmology. Accordingly, in Rambam's view that was likely the dominant biblical position. He states in 2:4:

Neither Aristotle nor anyone else has affirmed categorically that the number of the intellects is ten or one hundred; but he stated that their number was equal to that of the spheres. As it was thought in his time that there are fifty spheres, Aristotle stated that, if that were so, there were fifty separate intellects.

Accordingly, the number ten was a modern idea. He explains its origins:

With regard to the opinion of the later philosophers that there are ten separate intellects, it may be explained by the fact that they counted the globes in which there are stars as well as the all-encompassing sphere, although in some of these globes there are several spheres. The globes are nine according to their reckoning; namely, the one that encompasses the universe, the sphere of the fixed stars, and the spheres of the seven planets. The tenth intellect is the Active Intellect, whose existence is indicated by the facts that our intellects pass from potentiality to actuality and that the forms of the existents that are subject to generation and corruption are actualized after they have been in their matter only in potentia.

Thus, one would have expected Chazal to have believed in eight⁹¹ angelic categories, and the Prophets in six⁹².

⁹⁰Its details will be discussed in a later section.

⁹¹ Since we must add the Active Intellect. Some associate the Active Intellect with the Sandalfon Braita in Chagigah 13b.

⁹² The number six may be confusing to some readers and bears explanation. While Ezekiel is described as having a four sphere cosmology, this is a misnomer, as Rambam actually acknowledges he would have been aware of a fifth, all encompassing sphere (parallel with the ninth sphere of Rambam's system). Indeed, this routine dismissal of the fifth sphere was one of Abarbanel's objections. It is unclear if

This leads us to the difficult passage in Yesodei Hatorah 2:7:

The variation in the names of the angels is based upon their degrees; they are therefore called: Holy Living Creatures, which are above all others, Wheels, Valiant Ones, Electrum, Flying Serpent, Angels, Gods, Sons of Gods, Chariot Bearers, and Men. All these ten names by which the angels are called designate their respective ten degrees; the degree which has nothing higher than itself, save only the degree of God, blessed is He! is the degree of the form which is called Living Creatures; thus it is spoken of in prophecy as being beneath the Throne of Glory. And the tenth degree is the degree of the form known as Men, which are the angels who speak with the prophets and appear to them in the vision of prophecy. Therefore they are called Men, as their degree approaches the degree of the intellect of the sons of man.

Here, innovating beyond Al Farabi, Rambam gives biblical names to all ten levels. This list is problematic for two reasons.

The first issue is one of names. The list includes Chayot and Ophanim, both of which Rambam interpreted in the Guide as not referring to the separate intellects in the Merkavah vision. Granted, in the Guide he does not give the intellects names, which may lead one to conclude that this is a contradiction between the Guide and Mishneh Torah, demonstrating that at the time of writing Mishneh Torah, he had not fully developed his Merkavah theories.⁹³ Not only does this seem unlikely based on the above analysis that demonstrated the remarkable concordance of ideas between the

Rambam thought Ezekiel had a conception of the Active Intellect, although since this is the intellect that prophets commune with, presumably he did. Thus, he would have thought there were six separate intellects or angelic classes.

⁹³ A position taken in Kreisel, Howard. "Chapter Two. From Esotericism To Science: The Account Of The Chariot In Maimonidean Philosophy Till The End Of The Thirteenth Century." In *The Cultures of Maimonideanism*, pp. 21-56. Brill, 2009.

first four chapters of Mishneh Torah and the Guide, a closer reading of Mishneh Torah, as is often the case, completely resolves the issue.

The list enumerates Chayot and Cherubim as separate categories, despite the fact that in the explicit verses of Ezekiel itself, Chayot and Cherubim are identified as synonyms. Ezekiel 10:15 declares:

The cherubs ascended; those were the Chayya that I had seen by the Chebar Canal.⁹⁴

Further, in Guide 3:7, Rambam himself acknowledges that these words are synonyms. It is extremely unlikely that he was unaware of this verse when writing Mishneh Torah. What emerges as the most likely possibility is that he viewed these terms as homonyms (a notion he is very fond of in the Guide). Perhaps he thought the terms must be homonyms from their use elsewhere in rabbinic literature where Chayot and Cherubim appear distinct from each other and they and Ophanim are used differently than their usage in the Merkavah vision⁹⁵; regardless it is clear from Mishneh Torah that these words are intended as homonyms, and poses no contradiction to the Guide⁹⁶.

The second, far more thorny issue with this list is its purpose. There are conceivably three purposes that this list could serve, corresponding more or less to the two schools of Maimonidean interpretation described above, with the first two in the Twersky camp and the third in the Strauss camp.

⁹⁴ New, J. P. S. "Tanakh, The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text." (1985).

⁹⁵ See for example Chullin 92a where Ophanim clearly denotes an angel and cannot refer to the elements. See further the Shema blessings, where Ophanim and Chayot are clearly angels. Further see Genesis 3:24 where Cherubim seem to be angels.

⁹⁶ The anonymous commentator to Yesodei Hatorah ascribes to this homonym approach as well. See Guide 1:9 where he encourages the reader in general to seek out homonyms in general.

- 1) Rambam often attempted to provide a systematic presentation of earlier positions. While his presentation may be original, it is intended as a clearer formulation of the beliefs of Chazal.⁹⁷
- 2) It is intended as a departure from Chazal (and correspondingly from their understanding of Scripture), and instead reflects what he believes to be the true biblical position, which he, with his greater philosophical knowledge, is better positioned to understand.
- 3) He does not think Chazal thought this, nor the prophets. By citing biblical names of angels, his intent is to give legitimacy to his opinion among the masses, under the guise of earlier authority, to aid in its dissemination. However, in reality he did not view this presentation as sourced in the bible or Chazal.⁹⁸

All three of these possibilities are difficult. The problem with the first two is that it is clear from the Guide that he did not think Chazal nor the Prophets counted nine Spheres. Since the number of intellects follows directly from the number of Spheres, it is strange to think either Chazal or the Prophets would have counted ten classes of angels. While it is possible he had not yet come to his conclusions about Chazal and the prophets, that is highly unlikely, since Chazal explicitly listed the heavens as seven, and the number four is central to the Merkavah narrative. Further, the homonymous usage of several terms⁹⁹ means that this position does not at all emerge clearly from the bible¹⁰⁰.

The third approach is difficult as well. First of all, while to a certain degree, such esotericism and misdirection is to be expected in the Guide, it is totally out of place in

⁹⁷ An excellent example of this are his thirteen articles of faith. The formulation is uniquely his own, but is not intended as an innovation but as a systematic presentation of that which had become obscure.

⁹⁸ This would be ironic, as ten angelic classes became more or less the standard as a result of this.

⁹⁹ As mentioned above, Ophanim, Chayot, and Cherubim are homonyms. Chashmal as well is used in a different sense. Additionally, many of the rest of the terms are obvious homonyms, such as Malachim, which can also refer to angels in general, Elokim, which can mean God, and Ishim, which can mean men,

¹⁰⁰ Since the terms could be referring to the same thing as each other, or as to something else altogether.

Mishneh Torah¹⁰¹ which is generally a much more straightforward work. Aside from being uncharacteristic, the utility of such a misdirection is doubtful. Had he stated there were ten ranks of angels, and not attempted to name them, the same goal would have been accomplished. Indeed, this formulation would have accomplished this goal even better, leaving the reader with less cause to become aware of this misdirection.

Thus, if we are to take his words at face value, the only possible resolution is that he thought, despite the above objections to this, that indeed Chazal or the Prophets had believed in ten angelic classes. The resolution to the above difficulties can be explained in one of two ways¹⁰²:

- 1) Statements of Chazal, and perhaps scripture, led him to believe that they ascribed to a ten intellect system, the number of spheres¹⁰³ in their cosmologies notwithstanding.¹⁰⁴ While in 2:4 he stated that the two numbers must correlate, it has already been shown that he did not view Chazal as systematic and proof

¹⁰¹ Indeed, not a single other example comes to mind.

¹⁰² There is actually a third possibility, far more involved than the other two. In 3:4, Rambam presents targum as a dissenting understanding of the Merkavah, where Ophanim are spheres. It remains unclear what the Chayyot are. The two likeliest options are spheres as well, or separate intellects. The latter is unlikely, since it would make the man above the Chayyot God himself, something the Rambam would find abhorrent and not accuse the Targum of. Further, the Targum to 1:14 actually makes the Chayyot sound like spheres. Thus, it is more probable that according to the Rambam's read of Targum, the Ophanim are the lower spheres, the Chayyot the upper ones, and the man the intellects. Four Ophanim, four Chayot, and the all encompassing Firmament above them, leads to nine spheres. Perhaps in Mishneh Torah, Rambam still subscribed to the view of the Targum, which is why he named the angels, but in the Guide, he changed his mind and thought differently. This would explain why he thought Chazal counted ten spheres. While this is a strong and interesting possible explanation, our analysis will assume that the Guide and Mishneh Torah are in agreement.

¹⁰³ It is interesting to note that in 2 Enoch, there are ten heavens, the highest of which is Aravot, even though there were not that many heavenly bodies.

¹⁰⁴ However, see the beginning of Guide 2:4 where, in regards to the philosophers, an opposite statement is made, that the spheres and intellects must correspond. However, Chazal were not necessarily bound by that, their speculation being less proof based as shown above.

based. Thus it is possible he believed that they were inconsistent in this matter, based on a tradition.

- 2) The biblical grouping into four spheres includes a single sphere for all the planets. While they are grouped as one since they serve a similar purpose, undoubtedly each sub-sphere possessed its own intellect. Similarly, Chazal's grouping of seven did not include fewer heavenly bodies, but grouped them differently. Thus, in a way the number of spheres is a game of semantics.

Which of these two approaches is preferable hinges on an ambiguity in the following passages. Here, he attempts to resolve Chazal's statement of the number of heavens with his own system. In 1:70 he says:

The textual words of the Sages, may their memory be blessed, which are repeated in every relevant passage, assert that there are seven heavens and that arboth is I the highest encompassing the universe. Do not think it blameworthy that according to their reckoning there were seven heavens, whereas there are more than that. For sometimes, as is clear to those engaged in speculation on this subject: and as I shall make clear further on, a sphere is counted as one though there be several heavens contained in it

He further states in 2:9 regarding the position in Chazal that there are two firmaments:

We have already made it clear to you that in Aristotle's time the number of the spheres had not been accurately established and that those who in our time count nine spheres, only count as one a globe that includes several spheres, as is clear to whoever has studied the science of astronomy. For this reason you also should not regard as blameworthy this dictum of some of the Sages, may their memory be blessed: There are two firmaments; for it is said: Behold, unto the Lord thy God belongeth the heaven, and the heaven of heavens. For he who says this counts the whole globe of the stars I mean the spheres in which there are stars - as one globe, and again counts the globe of the all-encompassing

sphere in which there is no star as the second globe. Consequently, he says:
There are two firmaments.

It is unclear if he means to say that one should not view Chazal negatively, as their position is plausible, or that they are not fundamentally at odds with him, since the issue is one of semantics. That the passage starts with “in the age of Aristotle the number of spheres was not accurately known” is indicative of the first approach is correct, but the ambiguity remains, and there is no question that the continuation of 2:9, the four sphere set up, makes use of the semantic ambiguity by introducing subspheres. As Rambam notes in 2:4, the ambiguity in grouping sub-spheres is evident in his system as well.¹⁰⁵

Most clearly this is stated in 2:11:

Thus even on this hypothesis, our ordering of the universe in which we counted the sphere of the fixed stars as one sphere - just as we have counted the five spheres of the planets, in spite of the multiplicity of their spheres, as one sphere - would not be disarranged.

Whichever of these two approaches is preferable, the question remains: what led Rambam to think Chazal believed in ten intellects? One intriguing answer is that there are several cryptic statements of Chazal that may lead in that direction. Many Kabbalists later assumed these references to be to the Sefirot, but it is possible Rambam thought they referred to the number of intellects¹⁰⁶. There has been a lot of bad scholarship on the relationship between Rambam and the Kabbalah, so it is important to be extremely clear here. In no way is this a suggestion that Rambam was a

¹⁰⁵ Already quoted above. The relevant part reads:

With regard to the opinion of the later philosophers that there are ten separate intellects, it may be explained by the fact that they counted the globes in which there are stars as well as the all-encompassing sphere, although in some of these globes there are several spheres.

¹⁰⁶ Rav Yosef Albo in Sefer Haikarim 2:11, among many others, assumes that the Sefirot and intelligences are one and the same.

kabbalist. Such a suggestion is ridiculous and an insult to the man he was. However, Kabbalists drew upon many sayings of Chazal to source their doctrine of Sefirot, and it is possible that Rambam, seeing these selfsame sources, would have been led to think that Chazal believed in ten separate intelligences.

In Chagigah 12a, in its discussion about Ma'aseh Bereshit, the Talmud writes:

Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: Ten things were created on the first day of Creation, and they are as follows: Heaven and earth; tohu and vohu, i.e., unformed and void; light and darkness; wind and water; the length of day and the length of night.

And further:

Rav Zutra bar Tuvia said that Rav said: The world was created through ten attributes: Through wisdom, through understanding, through knowledge, through strength, through rebuke, through might, through righteousness, through justice, through kindness, and through mercy.

This is followed immediately by a passage that seems to describe emanation. In Rabeinu Chananel's text, this passage was explicitly linked to the previous one:

And Rav Yehuda said that Rav said, with regard to the same matter: When the Holy One, Blessed be He, created the world, it continued to expand like two balls of a warp, whose cord lengthens as they unravel, until the Holy One, Blessed be He, rebuked it and made it stand still, as it is stated: "The pillars of heaven tremble and are astonished at His rebuke" (Job 26:11). And this is the same as that which Reish Lakish said: What is the meaning of that which is written: "I am the Almighty God [El Shaddai]" (Genesis 17:1)? It means: I am He Who said to the world "enough [dai]," instructing it to stop expanding

The location of these passages in Chagigah makes them especially pertinent, but many similar passages appear elsewhere. For example, the Mishneh in Avot 5:1 states:

With ten utterances the world was created. And what does this teach, for surely it could have been created with one utterance? But this was so in order to punish the wicked who destroy the world that was created with ten utterances, And to give a good reward to the righteous who maintain the world that was created with ten utterances.

Genesis Rabbah ch. 17 echoes the above and lists these ten utterances. Further in 3:9 we find:

It was taught: Twelve crowns were taken by that day. The first for the act of creation, the first for kings, the first for princes, the first for priesthood, the first for the divine presence, as it says (Exodus 25:8) “you shall make for me a sanctuary.” The first for blessing, the first for service, the first for the prohibition of foreign altars, the first for slaughter in the north, the first for the descent of fire, as it says (Leviticus 10:2) “And a fire emerged from before Hashem” etc.¹⁰⁷

And in Rosh Hashanah 32a:

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: They correspond to the ten utterances through which the world was created. The Gemara asks: Which are these ten utterances? The Gemara explains: This is referring to the ten times that the phrase “And He said” appears in the story of Creation in the first two chapters of Genesis. The Gemara asks: Does it refer to the repetition of the phrase: “And He said” in Genesis? There are only nine such phrases, not ten. The Gemara answers that the phrase “In the beginning” is also considered an utterance, as it is written: “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made” (Psalms 33:6), which indicates that all of creation came into existence through a single utterance, after which all matter

¹⁰⁷ Translation my own.

was formed into separate and distinct entities by means of the other nine utterances.

Additionally, Rambam was undoubtedly aware of Sefer Yetzirah, and while there is reason to believe he did not hold it in high esteem, that does not mean he thought it did not contain any correct ideas, even in a corrupted form.¹⁰⁸ The number ten is a significant number throughout and is deeply connected to creation. Here is an excerpt from the first Chapter that explicitly links the Sefirot to Ezekiel's vision¹⁰⁹:

The ten sefirot are the basis: restrain your heart from thinking; restrain your mouth from speaking. And if your heart races return to the place where you started, and remember that thus it is written: And the living creatures ran to and fro (Ezek.I:14). And concerning this matter a covenant was made.¹¹⁰

Once again, to be absolutely clear, this is not a suggestion that Rambam was a Kabbalist or believed in the Sefirot. What is being suggested is that the self same statements used by Kabbalists to source the sefirot in Chazal may have led Rambam to think Chazal thought there were ten angelic classes or intellects.

Summation of his view of Chazal and its accuracy

What emerges is that Rambam has quite a nuanced view of the Talmud, and is aware of a multiplicity of voices within it. While Rambam was a staunch rationalist, he was equally a profound scholar, and while he tremendously respected all the Rabbis found in Chazal, he was unwilling to whitewash all their opinions into his rationalism¹¹¹.

¹⁰⁸ Later on it will be shown that this seems to be his attitude towards the Hekhalot in General. Indeed, most of his ideas can be found in Hekhalot literature if one ignores the mystical aspects and focuses on the underpinning themes.

¹⁰⁹ There are different versions of the text with many variations.

¹¹⁰ Hayman, A.P., 2004. *Sefer Yeşira: edition, translation and text-critical commentary*. Mohr Siebeck.

¹¹¹ See Heschel, Abraham Joshua. "Torah min Hashamayim beApeklaria shel haDorot." (1962): 68. He argues that Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael represented these two schools of Rationalism and Mysticism. While his analysis has been called into question regarding how accurately these two scholars

He is further aware that the Talmud's editors had their own views that did not always correspond with the viewpoints that they purported to explain. He also believed their methods to have been very different from his own. Thus it is clear that when he refers to Chazal as philosophers, his intent is not its loaded meaning, but merely as people engaged in speculation, albeit less systematically and with less care for proofs beyond scripture. From various talmudic passages and midrashim, it is clearly the case that this is true.

The place of the Guide was to use his Aristotelian background to clarify the statements of Chazal in a systematic fashion, and to bring proof for that which they understood through tradition alone.

Setting the Stage: The plausibility of his reconstruction

Another massive critique raised was the superimposing of anachronous cosmological notions onto Chazal. Once again, a closer examination is required.

To be clear, there are actually three cosmologies at stake here. Rambam was attempting to reconstruct a tradition of Chazal that itself was reconstructing biblical cosmology, making the issue complicated. The key points of the Rambam's cosmology will now be identified and corresponding ideas in Chazal and Tanach discussed. The goal is to see to what extent the Rambam's ideas were anachronistic and to what extent they were accurate, or at least a plausible reconstruction of what the Merkavah was. This will be done as follows:

- 1) A brief overview of Chazal's Celestial Cosmology will be explored.
- 2) Its differences with Rambam's cosmology, as well as Rambam's awareness of the differences, will be established.
- 3) The notion of Classical Elements in Rabbinic literature will be explored in depth.

can really be divided, the general point of Chazal containing more and less philosophical intellectuals remains largely valid.

- 4) The theme of Prophecy as central to the Merkavah will be developed.
- 5) The plausibility of linking the Merkavah to the spheres and elements will be discussed, including Rambam's four sphere theory.

An Overview of the Cosmology of Chazal: Celestial Spheres and Heavenly Bodies

The cosmology of Chazal was a mixture of near eastern traditions and the 'newer' ptolemaic system. The Talmud in Chagigah 12b fleshes out the notion of seven heavens:

Rabbi Yehuda said: There are two firmaments, as it is stated: "Behold, to the Lord your God belongs the heaven and the heaven of heavens" (Deuteronomy 10:14), indicating that there is a heaven above our heaven. Reish Lakish said: There are seven firmaments, and they are as follows: Vilon, Rakia, Shehakim, Zevul, Ma'on, Makhon, and Aravot.

From the rest of the Talmud's discussion there, it is clear that at least the latter five heavens are beyond the physical universe, since all the planets and heavenly bodies are between the second and third firmaments. Other sources, such as the Braita of Samuel chapter seven, and Braita of Mazalot paragraph 12, place each body in a Rakiah¹¹², and indeed this is likely the original source of their being seven heavens (their being seven ancient heavenly bodies). It is likely that the seven firmaments originally corresponded with this, and the Talmud reflects a later development where the heavens took on a metaphysical existence independent of the celestial objects therein.

Rambam ascribes two key properties to celestial bodies: they are sentient, and embedded on spheres of ether. In both Mishneh Torah and the Guide, the working assumption is that the rabbinic firmament and Greek sphere are one and the same. He was convinced that Chazal subscribed to the same views. In Mishneh Torah, he

¹¹² The dating of these works is likely post talmudic, but it is hard to be sure.

identifies the Rakiah in Chazal with the Spheres, even though he thinks there are nine spheres and Chazal said there were seven¹¹³ Rakiem¹¹⁴. In Guide 1:70 he explains the discrepancy.

While the Talmud in Chagigah seems to think all the planets and heavenly bodies are between the second and third spheres, and the latter ones are non-physical, other sources, such as the Braita of Samuel chapter seven, and Braita of Mazalot paragraph 12, place each body in a Rakiah, and indeed this is likely the original source of their being seven heavens (their being seven ancient heavenly bodies). It is likely that the seven firmaments originally corresponded with this, and the Talmud reflects a later development where the heavens took on a metaphysical existence independent of the celestial objects therein.

A key passage in Pesachim 94b has the sages discussing the merits of the earlier system and later system. Note how the term sphere (galgal) begins to appear as a synonym to firmament, a sign of an awareness of ptolemaic terms and their correspondence with earlier concepts.:

“In a discussion related to the structure of the natural world, the Sages taught: The Jewish Sages say the celestial sphere of the zodiac is stationary, and the constellations revolve in their place within the sphere; and the sages of the nations of the world say the entire celestial sphere revolves, and the constellations are stationary within the sphere. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said: A refutation of their words that the entire sphere moves can be derived from the fact that we have never found the constellation of Ursa Major in the South or Scorpio in the North. This indicates that it is the stars themselves that revolve in

¹¹³ He also explains the opinion in Chazal that there are two firmaments as being a different system of counting in Guide 2:9.

¹¹⁴ The anonymous commentator on Yesodei Hatorah thinks Rambam is not making this equation since the number nine and seven disagree. He thinks Rambam thinks the latter 5 Rekiim are non physical. Indeed, it seems Ramban on Genesis subscribes to this, as does the Talmud in Chagigah. But a close read of Mishneh Torah reveals that Rambam does conflate Rekiem and Spheres. Evidently, the commentator did not know the explicit passages in the Guide.

place and not the celestial sphere as a whole, because otherwise it would be impossible for Ursa Major to remain in the North and Scorpio to remain in the South.

Rav Aḥa bar Ya'akov strongly objects to this proof: And perhaps the stars are stationary within the sphere like the steel socket of a mill, which remains stationary while the stones of the mill revolve around it. Alternatively, perhaps they are stationary like the pivot of a door, which remains stationary while the door makes wide turns around it; similarly, perhaps the constellations are stationary within a sphere, and there is an outer sphere within which the sun revolves around all the constellations. Therefore, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's statement is not necessarily true.

The Gemara presents a similar dispute: The Jewish Sages say that during the day the sun travels beneath the firmament and is therefore visible, and at night it travels above the firmament. And the sages of the nations of the world say that during the day the sun travels beneath the firmament, and at night it travels beneath the earth and around to the other side of the world. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said: And the statement of the sages of the nations of the world appears to be more accurate than our statement. A proof to this is that during the day, springs that originate deep in the ground are cold, and during the night they are hot compared to the air temperature, which supports the theory that these springs are warmed by the sun as it travels beneath the earth."¹¹⁵

In Chazal's Cosmology, based on earlier near eastern ideas¹¹⁶, the earth was a globe floating in a vast cosmic ocean. That is why the sun could not pass below the earth and instead had to pass above the firmament. However, from the above passage it is clear

¹¹⁵ William Davidson Translation.

¹¹⁶ See: Warren, William Fairfield. *The Earliest Cosmologies: The Universe as Pictured in Thought by Ancient Hebrews, Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, Iranians, and Indo-Aryans; a Guidebook for Beginners in the Study of Ancient Literatures and Religions*. Eaton & Mains, 1909.

that Chazal were aware of the alternative ideas, including the spherical model, and in some instances adopted them over their own.

Correspondence between Chazal's and Rambam's Cosmology

While Rambam viewed the bodies as embedded on the spheres which were rotating, the Chazal view seems to be that the bodies move between the Rakiem, which act as partitions and are stationary. Rambam was aware of this difference and addresses it explicitly in Guide 2:8¹¹⁷, where he admits that the sages erred in saying the spheres made sound, and says this view was a result of thinking the spheres are stationary and the heavenly bodies move within them. He also says that the sages eventually rejected this view. Here he refers to the passage in Pesachim quoted above, where the sages debated the merits of both systems and in the end seemed to accord with the position of Rambam.

Another important part of Rambam's Cosmology is the sentience of the heavenly bodies. Rambam brings many scriptural sources and Rabbinic sources in Guide 2:5, demonstrating quite convincingly that Chazal were of this same view. He writes:

As for the assertion that the spheres are living and rational, I mean to say endowed with apprehension, it is true and certain also from the point of view of the Law; they are not dead bodies similar to fire and earth - as is thought by the ignorant - but they are - as the philosophers say - living beings who obey their Lord and praise Him and extol Him greatly. Thus Scripture says: The heavens tell of the glory of God, and so on. How very remote from mental representation of the truth are those who think that this is language appropriate to the state of the speaker. For the terms speaking and telling are applied together in Hebrew only to a being endowed with intellect. The manifest proof of the fact that Scripture

¹¹⁷ Already cited above.

describes their state according to their essence -I mean to say the state of the spheres - not the state according to which people consider them, is the dictum: There is no speech, there are no words, neither is their voice heard. It thus makes it clear and manifest that it describes the essence of the spheres as praising God and making known His wonders without speech of lip and tongue. And this is correct. For he who praises through speech only makes known what he has represented to himself. Now this very representation is the true praise, whereas the words concerning it are meant to instruct someone else or to make it clear concerning oneself that one has had the apprehension in question. Thus it says, Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still, Selah, as we have explained. This is a proof based on the Law that may be denied only by one who is ignorant or obstinate. As for the opinion of the Sages concerning this, I do not think that it requires to be explained or proved. Consider the way they arranged the blessing of the moon, as well as what is repeatedly stated in the prayers and the texts of the Midrashim regarding the dicta: And the host of heaven I worshippeth Thee, and: When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy. Similar dicta occur frequently in what they say. Thus they say in Bereshzih Rabbah with regard to the dictum of Him, may He be exalted, if And the earth was tohu and bohu: [It was] mourning [toha] and crying [boha] which means that it, I mean the earth, cried woe and howled because of her evil lot. It said, I and they were created together - which means the earth and the heavens. [Yet] those above are alive and those below dead. They also have said explicitly that the heavens are living bodies and not dead ones like the elements. Thus it has become clear to you that what Aristotle said likewise with regard to the sphere being endowed with apprehension and mental representation corresponds to the dicta of our prophets and of the bearers of our Law, who are the Sages, may their memory be blessed.

While of course it is plausible that these scriptural passages are all meant to be understood metaphorically, as those who are critical of the rambam may point out, it is certainly equally plausible that Rambam was correct.

The last major cosmological distinction between Rambam and Chazal is in the number of the spheres. Several commentators to Mishneh Torah attempt to address this discrepancy, but Rambam himself addresses it in Guide 1:70 and 2:9 as cited above.

Further in 3:14 after reconciling some astronomical statements of Chazal with his knowledge of astronomy, he writes:

Do not ask of me to show that everything they have said concerning astronomical matters conforms to the way things really are. For at that time mathematics were imperfect. They did not speak about this as transmitters of dicta of the prophets, but rather because in those times they were men of knowledge in these fields or because they had heard these dicta from the men of knowledge who lived in those times. Because of this I will not say with regard to dicta of theirs, which, as we find, corresponds to the truth, that they are incorrect or have been said fortuitously. For whenever it is possible to interpret the words of an individual in such a manner that they conform to a being whose existence has been demonstrated, this is the conduct that is most fitting and most suitable for an equitable man of excellent nature.

In conclusion, Chazal's worldview had two major differences: seven spheres and not nine, and the spheres were stationary as opposed to rotating. Rambam explicitly addresses both issues. Further, the sentience of the heavenly bodies and doctrine of angels conforms more or less with his notion of intelligences.

Classical Elements in Rabbinic Literature

The four elements are usually associated with the Greeks, having originated with the early philosopher Empedocles. This lends itself easily to the assertion that Rambam had no basis in grafting the notion onto Judaism. However, this is surprisingly not the

case. There is actually ample evidence that Chazal were aware of some similar system.¹¹⁸

One such source describing primordial elements has already been discussed, and can be found in Chagigah 12a:

Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: Ten things were created on the first day of Creation, and they are as follows: Heaven and earth; *tohu* and *vohu*, i.e., unformed and void; light and darkness; wind and water; the length of day and the length of night.

All of these are derived from the Torah: Heaven and earth, as it is written: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). *Tohu* and *vohu*, as it is written: "And the earth was unformed and void [*tohu vavohu*]" (Genesis 1:2). Light and darkness; darkness, as it is written: "And darkness was upon the face of the deep" (Genesis 1:2); light, as it is written: "And God said: Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3). Wind and water, as it is written: "And the wind of God hovered over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2). The length of day and the length of night, as it is written: "And there was evening, and there was morning, one day" (Genesis 1:5).

It was taught in the Tosefta: *Tohu* is a green line that encompasses the entire world, and from which darkness emerges, as it is stated: "He made darkness His hiding place round about Him" (Psalms 18:12), indicating that a line of darkness surrounds the world. *Vohu*; these are damp stones submerged in the depths, from which water emerges, as it is stated: "And He shall stretch over it the line of *tohu* and stones of *vohu*" (Isaiah 34:11), which demonstrates that *tohu* is a line and that *vohu* is referring to stones.

We further find there:

¹¹⁸ Unfortunately, a systematic presentation of this question has not been done in the past. The Jewish Encyclopedia entry on Cosmogony (<http://www.Jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4684-cosmogony>) proved helpful, but many of these sources were found through independent investigation and search engines. See Kaufmann Kohler and Emil G. Hirsch, "Cosmogony," *Jewish Encyclopedia*

What is the meaning and source of the word “heaven” [shamayim]? Rabbi Yosei bar Ḥanina said: It is an acronym, shesham mayim, meaning: That water is there. It was taught in a baraita: Shamayim means esh umayim, fire and water, which teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, brought them both and combined them together, and made the firmament from them.

Another version of Rav’s statement can be found in Pirke DiRabbi Eliezer, Ch. 3¹¹⁹:

Eight things were created on the first day, namely, Heaven, Earth, Light, Darkness, Tohu (Chaos), Bohu (Void), Wind (or Spirit), and Water, as it is said, "And the wind of God was moving upon the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2).

Whence were the heavens created? From the light of the garment with which He was robed. He took (of this light) and stretched it like a garment and (the heavens) began to extend continually until He caused them to hear, "It is sufficient." Therefore is He called God Almighty (El Shaddai), who said to the world: "It is sufficient," and it stood (firm). Whence do we know that the heavens were created from the light of His garment? Because it is said, "Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment; who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain" (Ps. 104:2).

Whence was the earth created? He took of the snow (or ice) which was beneath His Throne of Glory and threw it upon the waters, and the waters became congealed so that the dust of the earth was formed, as it is said, "He saith to the snow, Be thou earth" (Job 37:6).¹²⁰

Earlier sources in Bereshit Rabbah give differing numbers. In 10:4 we find:

And the heaven and the earth were finished, etc. How did the Holy One, blessed be He, create His world? Said R. Johanan: The Lord took two balls, one of fire

¹¹⁹ This is the passage mentioned earlier as having confounded the Rambam.

¹²⁰ Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, trans. Gerald Friedlander, London, 1916

and the other of snow, and worked them into each other, and from these the world was created. R. Iananah said: [He took] four [balls], for the four corners [of the universe]. R. Hama said: Six: four for the four corners and one for above and one for below.

Hadrian — may his bones rot! — asked R. Joshua b. R. Hanina : ' How did the Holy One, blessed be He, create the world?' He answered him in accordance with R. Ilama. 'Is that actually possible!' exclaimed he. Thereupon he led him into a small chamber and said to him: 'Stretch out your hand to east, west, north, and south. Even so was the work [of Creation] before the Lord.'¹²¹

Compare this with Genesis Rabbah 1:8-9:

R. Menahem and R. Joshua b. Levi said in the name of R. Levi 6 : A builder requires six things: water, earth, timber, stones, canes, and Iron. And even if you say, He is wealthy and does not need canes, yet he surely requires a measuring rod, as it is written, And a measuring reed in his hand (Ezek. XL, 3). Thus the Torah preceded [the creation of the world] by these six things, .., kedem ('the first'), me-az ('of old'), me-olam ('from everlasting'), me-rosh (' from the beginning'), and miekadmin (' or ever '), which counts as two.

A certain philosopher¹²² asked R. Gamaliel, saying to him: 'Your God was indeed a great artist, but surely He found good materials which assisted Him?' 'What are they?' said he to him? ' Tohu, bohu, darkness, water, wind (ruah), and the deep/ replied he. 'Woe to that man/ he exclaimed. 'The term "creation" is used by Scripture in connection with all of them/ Tohu and bohu : I make peace and

¹²¹ Translation of both passages of Genesis Rabbah from:

Rabba, Genesis. "Translated into English with Notes, Glossary and Indices under the editorship of Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman, BA." PhD diss., Ph. D. and Maurice Simon, MA, Stephen Austin and Sons, LTD., The Soncino Press, London, 1939.

¹²² Mention of a Philosopher is significant, and indeed his formulation most closely resembles the Greeks if we take Tohu and Bohu as unformed matter, he then lists four other elements.

create evil (Isa. xlv, j); darkness: I form the light, and create darkness (ib.) ; water : Praise Him., ye heavens of heavens, and ye waters that are , above the heavens (Ps. cxlviii, 4) — wherefore ? For He commanded, and they were created (ib. 5) ; wind : For, lo, He that formeth the mountains, and createth the wind (Amos IV, 13); the depths: When there were no depths, I was brought forth (Prov. VIII, 24).

The conclusion from all these earlier works is that while Chazal clearly had a notion of elements, in this early period it was much more amorphous than the greek system of four. Josepus, who undoubtedly predates the Mishneh¹²³, makes mention of the Greek system. In History of the wars of the Jews and the Romans, book 5, chapter 5:4, he states, when describing the Temple Curtain:

It was a Babylonian curtain, embroidered with blue, and fine linen, and scarlet, and purple: and of a contexture that was truly wonderful. Nor was this mixture of colours without its mystical interpretation: but was a kind of image of the universe. For by the scarlet there seemed to be enigmatically signified fire; by the fine flax, the earth; by the blue, the air; and by the purple, the sea. Two of them having their colours the foundation of this resemblance: but the fine flax, and the purple have their own origin for that foundation. The earth producing the one, and the sea the other. This curtain had also embroidered upon it all that was mystical in the heavens; excepting that of the [twelve] signs, representing living creatures.¹²⁴

¹²³ Interestingly, Zoroaster may have been the first to describe the four elements, pushing the theory indeed back to biblical times, and the right geographical location. However, his conception seems to be different. For a more in depth treatment, see: Habashi, Fathi. "Zoroaster and the theory of four elements." *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* 25, no. 2 (2000): 109-115.

¹²⁴ Flavius Josephus. *The Works of Flavius Josephus*. Translated by. William Whiston, A.M. Auburn and Buffalo. John E. Beardsley. 1895.

While Josephus was far more Hellenized than the average Jew at the time, the ubiquity implicit in his discussion of the elements does indicate that Jews at the time were somewhat aware of the notion, even if not subscribing to it.¹²⁵

Later Rabbinic and pseudographic sources begin to have a system closer to that of the Rambam. *Sefer Yetzirah* is a notoriously difficult book to date¹²⁶, with estimates ranging from early Mishnaic to Geonic periods. Note that there seems to be three and not four elements. Here is a relevant passage:

The twenty-two letters are the foundation: three primary letters, seven double (letters), and twelve simple (letters). Three primary letters: Alef, Mem, Shin - a great secret, hidden and ineffable and glorious from which go out fire and air and water, from which everything was created.¹²⁷

Further, *Exodus Rabbah*, a later Midrash, the following sources can be found. In chapter 13 the description from *Pirke DiRabbi Eliezer* is given¹²⁸:

i. And the Lord said unto Moses: Go in unto Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart, etc. (x, i). Thus it is written : A stone is heavy, and the sand weighty ; but a fool's vexation is heavier than they both (*Prov. xxvii, 3*). Abnimos of Gadara asked our Sages: How was the earth originally created? They replied: No man is an expert in these things : but go to Abba Joseph, the builder. So he went and found him standing upon a scaffold, and said to him: 'I have a question to ask of you.' The reply came: 'I cannot descend, because I am hired by the day; but ask

¹²⁵ Although, perhaps since Josephus had a vested interest in presenting a certain view of Judaism to a non-Jewish audience, he was deliberately adding in foreign elements that were not common Jewish thought at the time. It is difficult to know for sure.

¹²⁶ The *Zohar* as well is full of references to the four elements, but its dating is so uncertain and late so the observation is of little relevance.

¹²⁷ Hayman, A. Peter. *Sefer Yeşira: edition, translation and text-critical commentary*. Mohr Siebeck, 2004. pg. 111.

¹²⁸ Possibly 'dust' is a corruption of 'snow'.

anything you like.' He then said to him: 'How was the earth originally created?' The reply was : ' God took dust from beneath the Throne of Glory, and cast it into the water, where it became earth, and the little pebbles that were in the dust became mountains and hills, as it says: When the dust runneth into a mass, and the clods cleave fast together' (Job xxxviii, 38).¹²⁹

In 15:22 we read:

Who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain, a proof that the heavens were created after He had created light. Three things preceded the creation of the world — water, wind, and fire. The waters conceived and gave birth to thick darkness; the fire conceived and gave birth to light; the wind conceived and gave birth to wisdom, and with these six things the world is maintained: with wind, wisdom, fire, light, darkness, and water.

And later on in 23:13, the a more greek, but still Jewish, notion is incorporated¹³⁰:

All things exalt themselves over something else; darkness exalts itself over the deep, because it is above it, and the wind exalts itself over the water because it is above it; fire exalts itself above the wind because it is above it, and the heavens exalt themselves over the fire, because they are above it, but God is exalted over everything — hence: For He is highly exalted. R. Abin said : Four kinds of exalted beings have been created in the world. The most exalted of all living creatures is man ; of birds, the eagle; of cattle, the ox; and of wild beasts, the lion. All of these received royalty and had greatness bestowed upon them, and they are set under the chariot of God, as it says, As for the likeness of their faces, they had the face of a man ; and they four had the face of a lion . . . and . . . also the face of an eagle (Ezek. i, i0). Why was this ? So that they should not exalt themselves in the world and they should know that the Kingdom of Heaven

¹²⁹ Rabbah, Midrash. "Translated into English with notes, glossary and indices under the editorship of Rabbi Dr." *H. Freedman and Maurice Simon with a Foreword by Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein. London (1939).*

¹³⁰ The Merkavah connection is important and will be discussed later.

is over them. For this reason does it say, For one higher than the high watcheth, and there are higher than they (Eccl. v, 7). This is the meaning of For He is highly exalted.

Especially important is the explicit Merkavah connection, as well as the hierarchy of element being on top of each other, very similar to Rambam's description in Yesodei Hatorah 3:10

And finally, in Bamidbar Rabbah 14:12, the latest of the Rabbah collection, the word elements is used for the first time, and their greek titles are given:

Why three kinds for burnt-offerings and one for a sin-offering? In allusion to the four elements from which the Holy One, blessed be He, created the world, three of them being of a superior nature, one higher than the other, and the fourth the lowest, the heaviest of them all. They are as follows: The earth is the heaviest of all of them,² and in allusion to it the he-goat was offered.³ The water is above the earth; the air, from which the wind is formed, is above the earth, and the fire is above the air, for fire is lighter than all the others, ascending right up to the sky. A proof of this is that when the flame escapes from the live coal it soars and mounts upwards. It has also been said that fire surrounds the whole universe high up as far as the sky. In allusion to the fire, the wind, and the water, which are of a superior nature, the three kinds of burnt-offerings were brought.¹³¹

Note that the hierarchy here resembles Rambam's even more.

The Braita of Samuel HaKatan, as well as the Braita of Mazalot, have a greek-astrological elemental system, associating each element with three zodiac signs, but their dating is difficult to ascertain.¹³²

¹³¹ Rabbah, Midrash. "Translated into English with notes, glossary and indices under the editorship of Rabbi Dr." *H. Freedman and Maurice Simon with a Foreword by Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein. London (1939).*

¹³² Braita of Samuel Hakatan chapter 6, Braita of Mazalot, 1:11. The Zodiac and its possible Merkavah connections will be discussed later as well. See:

Bar Ilan, Meir. "Astrology and Other Sciences Among the Jews of the Land of Israel in the Hellenistic-Roman and Byzantine Periods" (2010)

There is one other possible reference to the four elements in the Talmud, but it remains ambiguous. Chullin 127a states:

When Rabbi Akiva would reach this verse in Leviticus, he would say in exclamation: "How great are Your works, O Lord" (Psalms 104:24). You have creatures that grow in the sea and you have creatures that grow on land. If those in the sea would ascend to the land they would immediately die. If those that are on land would descend to the sea they would immediately die.

Similarly, you have creatures that grow in the fire and you have creatures that grow in the air. If those in the fire would ascend to the air they would immediately die. If those in the air would descend to the fire they would immediately die.

Therefore, "how great are Your works, O Lord."

Aside from Chazal, the biblical cosmology must be examined as well. All medieval authorities read the elements into Genesis, but the question remains: is this reading forced, or natural? The key verse in Genesis is 1:2:

The earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water.¹³³

Genesis 2:30 explains:

Among the things you ought to know is that the four elements are the first to be mentioned after the heaven. For, as we have said, the term earth mentioned in the first place applies to them. For he mentions earth, water, spirit, and darkness. Now darkness is the elemental fire; do not think anything else. He says: And thou didst hear His words out of the midst of the fire; and he says: When ye heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness. And it also says: All darkness is laid up

¹³³ New, J. P. S. "Tanakh, The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text." (1985).

for His treasures; a fire not blown [by man] shall consume him. The elemental fire was designated by this term, because it is not luminous, but only transparent. For if the elemental fire had been luminous, we should have seen at night the whole atmosphere in flame like fire. The elements are mentioned according to their natural position; namely, first the earth, then the water that is above it, then the air that adheres to the water, then the fire that is above the air. For in view of the specification of the air as being over the face of the waters, darkness that is upon the face of the deep is indubitably above the spirit. It was impelled to use the expression, the spirit of God, in order to designate the air in view of the fact that the latter is supposed to be in motion, I mean to say *meraj:zepheth* [moving], and that the motion of the wind is always ascribed to God. Thus: And there went forth a wind from the Lord; Thou didst blow with Thy wind; And the Lord turned a west wind. This occurs frequently. In view of the fact that the term darkness [*hoshekh*], as employed in the first place, which designates the element, differs in its meaning from the term darkness [*hoshekh*], as employed afterwards in the signification of obscurity, it begins to explain and to differentiate, saying: And the darkness [*hoshekh*] He called Night, as we have explained. Consequently this is now clear.

It is also interesting to note that in the Genesis story, all of creation is seemingly formed from the earth, water, or the spirit of God. The reading of the Rambam, that these elements correspond exactly with the Greek ones, does not seem particularly compelling, but he does seem to be correct that some sort of primordial elements are being mentioned here, right at the beginning of the creation story.

Upon viewing all these sources, the likeliest conclusion is that Chazal, and likely the bible, had a notion of elements, but an amorphous one that by the medieval period had consolidated to be identical to the greek tradition.

The Merkavah Theory in Full View

Up until this point, the plausibility of Rambam's reconstruction, from a historical perspective, has been addressed. A few key questions remain unanswered:

- 1) If the majority of this book pertains to the Roshei Perakim, what indeed is the actual content of the Merkavah vision beyond Philosophy?
- 2) How can the prophet have been wrong?

To answer these questions, the following approach will be taken:

- 1) Rambam's general theory of prophecy will be explained.
- 2) Jacob's Ladder will serve as an insight to the relationship of all prophets with the Merkavah, serving to give insight into what the actual content of Merkavah is, and why it was so esoteric.
- 3) Once the entirety of Rambam's Merkavah view has been explored, from its historical basis in Chazal to its relationship with Prophecy and its content beyond the Roshei Perakim, two very compelling pieces of evidence will support this picture:
 1. The Hekhalot literature emerges as a likely source for many of these ideas, albeit in a distorted fashion.
 2. The structure of the Guide as a whole fits into place.

Rambam's Theory of Prophecy

Rambam's famous thirteen articles of faith have been paraphrased in many forms, the most familiar being the Yigdal prayer, and the Ani Maamin list found after the morning prayers in many prayer books. For whatever reason, the Ani Maamin's are often not

faithful representations of Rambam's opinion¹³⁴. His sixth principle relates to prophecy. The Ani Maamin states:

6. I believe with complete faith that all the words of the Prophets are true¹³⁵

Rambam's actual formulation is completely different:

6. Prophecy: that is that a person should know that among the human species, there is found those that naturally have highly elevated character traits and great wholeness and their souls become fit until they receive the form of the intellect. Afterwards that human intellect clings to the Active Intellect and It emanates lofty emanation to him. And these are the prophets and this is prophecy and this is its understanding. And the full elucidation of this principle is very lengthy and it is not our intention to demonstrate all of its paradigms and to elucidate the nature of its attainment; as this is the understanding of wisdom, more generally. Rather, I am mentioning it only in passing. And the verses of the Torah testify to the prophecy of many prophets.

There is no requirement to believe that all their words are true. The principle is to believe that prophecy as an institution exists. Later on in his Commentary on the Mishneh, in Chapter seven of his introduction to Avot, he states out his general theory of prophecy in more detail:

MANY passages are found in the Midrash, the Haggadah, and also the Talmud, which state that some of the prophets beheld God from behind many barriers, and some from behind only a few, according to the proximity of the prophet to Him, and the degree of his prophetic power. Consequently, the Rabbis

¹³⁴ In general Yigdal seems more accurate, as it is in the case. One important distinction, beyond the one discussed here, between the Rambam's list and Ani Maamin version, is the eighth principle and the accuracy of the Masoretic Text.

¹³⁵ Translation my own. Compare with Yigdal "The fullness of his prophecy he granted to his treasured and splendid people." These brief words completely capture the essence of Rambam's version.

said that Moses, our teacher, saw God from behind a single, clear, that is transparent, partition. As they express it, (Yevamot, 49b) "He (Moses) looked through a translucent specularia". Specularia is the name of a mirror made of some transparent body like crystal or glass, as is explained at the end of Tractate Keilim.

Let me now explain the above statement. In accordance with what we have made clear in Chapter 2, virtues are either intellectual or moral. Similarly, vices are intellectual, as ignorance, stupidity, and want of understanding; or they are moral as inordinate lust, pride, irascibility, anger, impudence, avarice, and many other similar defects, a list of which we have given and explained in Chapter 4. Each of these defects is as a partition separating man from God, the Most High. This is what the prophet meant when he said, (Isaiah 59:2) "But your iniquities have ever made a separation between you and your God"; which means that our sins which, as we have said, are the evil qualities are the partitions which separate us from God.

Know, then, that no prophet received the gift of prophecy, unless he possessed all the mental virtues and a great majority of the most important moral ones. So, the Rabbis said, (Nedarim 38a, Shabbat 92a) "Prophecy rests only upon the wise, the brave, and the rich". By the word "wise", they undoubtedly refer to all the mental perfections. By "rich", they designate the moral perfection of contentment, for they call the contented man rich, their definition of the word "rich" being, (Pirkei Avot 4:1) "Who is rich? He who is contented with his lot", that is, one who is satisfied with what fortune brings him, and who does not grieve on account of things which he does not possess. Likewise, "brave" stands for a moral perfection; that is, one who is brave guides his faculties in accordance with intelligence and reason, as we have shown in Chapter 5. The Rabbis say, (Pirkei Avot 4:1) "Who is brave? He who subdues his passions".¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Gorfinkle, Joseph Isaac, Ibn Tibbon, and Samuel ben Judah. *The Eight Chapters of Maimonides on Ethics:(Shemonah Perakim)*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1912.

Thus, already in Rambam's earliest work, he has quite a sophisticated description of prophecy. Prophecy is communion with the Active Intellect. A prophet's deficiencies, both mental and moral, serve as barriers and make God's word more difficult to discern, although mental deficiencies are more severe than moral ones. This very fact stands diametrically opposed to the assertion that every word of a prophet is always true. This stance on prophecy is echoed in Mishneh Torah Yesodei Hatorah 7:1:

It is a fundamental part of religion to acknowledge that God bestows prophecy upon the sons of men. But prophecy does not descend save upon a wise man, eminent in wisdom, of sterling character, never subdued by worldly passion, but conquering it by an ever-present will-power, broadminded and settled to the highest degree. A man, endowed with all these moral principles, of sound physique, when he enters the Pardes and is carried away with the current of these great and remote subjects, and possessed of a mind ready to understand and attain, he continuing to gain in saintliness, separated from the general public which follows the dark paths of the times, continuing to take care of himself, training his soul to heed no thought in idle affairs nor in the vanities and phantasies of the time, but his mind be constantly ready and directed Upward, connected to the Throne Beneath, to understand the Holy and Pure Intelligences and to penetrate the scope of Wisdom of the Holy One, blessed is He! from the First Intelligence even unto the summit of the earth to know from them His greatness —immediately the Holy Spirit will rest upon him. And, when the Spirit will rest upon him his soul will be mingling with the Angels of the degree of the Sphere called Men, and will be transformed into another being, and will understand his own intelligence that he is not as he was, but that he was elevated above the degree of other wise sons of man, as it is said of Saul: "And thou shalt prophesy among them and thou shalt be turned into another man" (I Sam. 10.6).

This passage provides some further insight into the mental capacities required. A prophet must enter the Pardes and contemplate the intelligences. The rest of the

chapter provides some more information regarding how this was done, some key points being:

- 1) All prophecy¹³⁷ takes place in a dream, vision, or trancelike state.¹³⁸
- 2) Prophecy is received as an allegory with its meaning.¹³⁹
- 3) In order to Prophecy, one must be in a mental state of contentment and enter into meditation. Music is helpful in this regard.
- 4) Prophecy requires an element of divine will; not all who prepare properly will become prophets.

All these ideas are restated in the Guide in even greater detail in 2:32-48. What emerges is the following description of prophecy:

A prophet is a man who, having perfected his mental capacities, is able to commune with the active intellect and use his imaginative faculties to interpret the image received. This communion cannot be achieved unless God allows it to be so. To communicate with the Active Intellect or Ishim, one must not be awake, but rather one must meditate upon the Pardes, that is the Separate intellects, and enter into an alternate state of consciousness via this mediation. He thus can receive visions from the lowest of these spheres, the Ishim, which will often include angelic figures, representing intelligences.

This gives the key to the question of the subject matter of the Merkavah. Knowledge of the Heavenly order, the spheres and their influences, is a prerequisite for prophetic experience, the real content of the Merkavah. This knowledge is the Roshei Perakim required for entering the prophetic trance.

Jacob's Ladder

Rambam describes this process most interestingly in his complex discussion of Jacob's ladder vision. In the Guide's introduction, he writes:

¹³⁷ Save Moses, whose prophecy is to be regarded as a wholly separate phenomenon. See 7:6.

¹³⁸ 7:2

¹³⁹ 7:3

Know that the prophetic parables are of two kinds. In some of these parables each word has a meaning, while in others the parable as a whole indicates the whole of the intended meaning. In such a parable very many words are to be found, not every one of which adds something to the intended meaning. They serve rather to embellish the parable and to render it more coherent or to conceal further the intended meaning; hence the speech proceeds in such a way as to accord with everything required by the parable's external meaning.

Understand this well.

Later he gives an example:

An example of the first kind of prophetic parable is the following text : And behold a ladder set up on the earth, and so on. In this text, the word ladder indicates one subject; the words set up on the earth indicate a second subject; the words and the top of it reached to heaven indicate a third subject; the words and behold the angels of God indicate a fourth subject; the word ascending indicates a fifth subject; the words and descending indicate a sixth subject; and the words And behold the Lord stood above it indicate a seventh subject. Thus every word occurring in this parable refers to an additional subject in the complex of subjects represented by the parable as a whole.

Finally, in 1:15 this vision is explained:

To stand erect [nasob or yasob] Though these two roots are different, their meaning, as you know, is identical in all their various forms. The term is equivocal. Sometimes it has the meaning of rising and being erect. Thus: And his sister stood erect afar off! The kings of the earth stood erect; They came out and stood erect. The term has also another meaning: to be stable and permanent. Thus: Thy word stands erect in heaven; this means that it is stable and constant. In all cases where this term occurs with reference, to the Creator, it has this meaning. Thus: And, behold, the Lord stood erect upon it, that is, was stably and constantly upon it, I mean upon the ladder, one end of which is in heaven, while

the other end is upon the earth. Everyone who ascends does so climbing up this ladder, so that he necessarily apprehends Him who is upon it, as He is stably and permanently at the top of the ladder. It is clear that what I say here of Him conforms to the parable propounded. For the angels of God are the prophets with reference to whom it is clearly said: And He sent an angel; And an angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim. How well put is the phrase ascending and descending, in which ascent comes before descent. For after the ascent and the attaining of certain rungs of the ladder that may be known comes the descent with whatever decree the prophet has been informed of, with a view to governing and teaching the people of the earth. As we have made clear, it is on this account that this is called descent.

Here is 1:10 where ascending and descending in relation to prophecy is explained in full:

Now we, the community of men, are, in regard to place as well as degree of existence, in a most lowly position if we are compared to the all-encompassing heavenly sphere; whereas He, may He be exalted, is in respect of true existence, sublimity, and greatness in the very highest position - an elevation that is not a spatial one. And as He, may He be exalted, wished as He did - to let some of us have knowledge deriving from Him and an overflow of prophetic inspiration, the alighting of the prophetic inspiration upon the prophet or the coming-down of the Indwelling to a certain place was termed descent; whereas the removal of this prophetic state from a particular individual or the cessation of the Indwelling in a place was termed ascent.

In 2:10, he provides a different interpretation of the Ladder, connecting to the four sphere theory of the Merkavah:

This number four is wondrous and should be an object of reflection. They said in Midrash Rabbi Tanhuma: How many steps were in the ladder? Four-which refers to the dictum: And behold a ladder set up on the earth. And in all the Midrashim it is mentioned and repeated that there are four camps of angels. However, in

some manuscripts I have seen the text: How many steps were in the ladder? Seven. But all the manuscripts and all the Midrashim agree that the angels of God, whom [Jacob] saw ascending and descending were only four and not any other number - two ascending and two descending - and that the four gathered together upon one step of the ladder, all four being in one row- namely, the two who ascend and the two who descend. They even learned from this that the breadth of the ladder seen in the vision of prophecy was equal to the dimension of the world plus one third. For the breadth of one angel in the vision of prophecy is equal to the dimension of one third of the world according to the dictum: And his body was like tarshish. Accordingly the breadth of the four is equal to that of the world plus one third. In his parables, Zechariah - when describing that there came out four chariots from between the two mountains, and the mountains were mountains of brass - says in interpretation of this: these are the four airs of the heavens which go forth after presenting themselves before the Lord of all the earth. They are accordingly the cause of everything that comes to pass in time. In regard to his mentioning brass and likewise the dictum burnished brass, perceive in them a certain equivocality. You shall hear an indication regarding this. As for their dictum that an angel is equal in breadth to a third of the world - namely, their dictum in Bereshith Rabbah, which reads textually: That the angel is the third part of the world - it is very clear. And we have explained it in our great compilation on the legalistic study of the Law. For all created things are divided into three parts: the separate intellects, which are the angels; the second, the bodies of the spheres; the third, first matter -I mean the bodies subject to constant change, which are beneath the sphere.

In the first interpretation, the ladder refers to the intelligences and the heavens, and the angels as prophets ascending and descending. Particularly of note is his explanation that Yored is when a prophet communes with above, as God is thereby descending as it were, although the perspective of the prophet is one of ascent.

In the latter interpretation, the ladder seems to represent the intelligences, whether that be four or seven, but this time the angels are seemingly the elements being influenced. These two interpretations are not entirely contradictory when one remembers that as stated above, prophetic ascent requires meditation on the spheres and their elemental influences.

Connecting this with the earlier material, the following picture can be painted regarding Rambam's view of the Merkavah.

Knowledge of Pardes is a prerequisite for prophecy. This consists of Understanding the nature of the heavens, which Chazal thought to be seven, their layout and influence upon the lower world. Once a prophet possesses this knowledge, he may contemplate it, meditating, perhaps with musical aid, until he enters a trance or altered state of consciousness. This process is called Yeridah, and can be compared to climbing a ladder. This body of knowledge is referred to as the Merkavah.

While every single word in the above paragraph is explicit in Rambam, as has been demonstrated, its correspondence with the Hekhalot is quite striking. The ladder is a common motif in Hekhalot¹⁴⁰, and the confounding term "Yordei Merkavah" is ubiquitous.¹⁴¹ In fact, it is almost identical in form, although the content of the knowledge and meditation is completely different. In the Hekhalot, the meditation consists of uttering divine names, and heaven is a chaotic place. In the Rambam's system, the meditation is not divine names but upon the sublime structure of the universe, and heaven is well ordered and follows fixed rules.

¹⁴⁰ Davila, J.R., 2013. Hekhalot Rabbati: The Greater (Book of the Heavenly) Palaces. In *Hekhalot Literature in Translation* (pp. 37-157). Brill.

¹⁴¹ See Hekhalot Rabbati, cited above, as well as:

Rowland, Christopher, and Christopher RA Morray-Jones. "A Version Of Hekhalot Zutarti." In *The Mystery of God: Early Jewish Mysticism and the New Testament*, pp. 265-301. Brill, 2009.

Hekhalot as a corrupted but surprisingly accurate precursor:

In the Guide there is a strong indication that Rambam was willing to borrow imagery and ideas from Hekhalot texts. In 3:51, Rambam presents his famous palace metaphor. Many scholars view this as a subtle Hekhalot reference¹⁴². Further, earlier manuscripts of Perush Hamishna have Rambam cite Shiur Komah, a Hekhalot work, as part of Ma'aseh Merkavah and prophecy, only to later cross it out.¹⁴³

Thus, his ladder interpretation, as well as his usage of 'Yored' therein, must be viewed in that context. It seems that Rambam's view of the Hekhalot was far more complex than commonly thought. He did not think, as many claim, that they were absolute nonsense, but rather that they were corrupted teachings containing much nonsense. Rambam's Merkavah, when read critically, is almost identical in form with these Hekhalot, but changing the meditation from divine names, in his view an abhorrent notion, to the ordered system of the heavens that Rambam describes via philosophy and Chazalic sources.

This observation is very significant, and serves to grant legitimacy to his entire enterprise. He was not a break from the Hekhalot, but their greatest interpreter, one who saw in them a genuine tradition regarding the Merkavah as a meditative method to obtain prophecy, but recognizing the nonsense of the meditations. He viewed their folly as significant, which is while he never cites them explicitly, but every non meditative aspect of the Hekhalot is part of his system, from the assertion that Merkavah relates to the heavens, to the notion that a prophet needs this knowledge to prophesy.

The structure of the Guide:

The table of contents of the Guide is somewhat confusing, however the intrinsic relation between prophecy and Merkavah explains the general structure very nicely.

¹⁴² See Harvey, Steven. "Maimonides in the sultan's palace'." (1991).

¹⁴³ See R. Jospe, Maimonides and Shi'ur Qomah [Hebrew]

Part I: God

- 1) A philological exploration of what God is and what can be known regarding him.
- 2) A philosophical explanation of this same topic

Part II: The Universe that Emanates from God.

- 1) The Spheres and Elements as the composition of this universe.
- 2) The origins of this Universe
- 3) Prophecy, the result of contemplating fully all of the above.

Part III: Merkavah

- 1) After explaining the order of the universe and prophecy, the Merkavah vision, based on an understanding of all the above, is presented. This is the climax of the book.
- 2) Miscellaneous philosophical problems, including theodicy, providence, and rationality of the commandments.

Significance of Prophetic Error:

That Rambam thinks Ezekiel was fallable is not surprising in light of his understanding of the “Aspaklaria She`eina Meirah.” Prophecy has an interpretive aspect, and the prophet interprets the given image in light of his worldview. It is thus not problematic that Ezekiel’s vision contained what he believed to be errors.

In a Straussian interpretation, Daniel Davies¹⁴⁴ argues that Rambam did not value Ezekiel, and its esoteric treatment of Ezekiel was because he did not want people to understand that Ezekiel was mistaken. His suggestion that Rambam did not find Metaphysics inherently esoteric, and only hid it to prevent the masses from realizing the mistakes of Ezekiel is a very non compelling thesis running against the entire thrust of

¹⁴⁴ Davies, Daniel, The Secret of the Ma'aseh Merkava According to Maimonides.

<https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-secret-of-the-maaseh-merkava-according-to-Rambam>

the Guide. The Merkavah is the Guide's climax, and one of the only locations in all of Tanach where Rambam gives a verse by verse commentary.

It is far more likely that Rambam still felt Ezekiel was extremely valuable, for its depiction of the universe and the attainment of meditative prophecy, even if some of his details were mistaken. Further, he seems to accept some of Ezekiel's ideas, even when they contradict his own worldview, based on the fact that Ezekiel uttered them. This alludes to the important principle: even if a prophet had mistaken notions, his interpretation, even if based on false premises, is valuable as a metaphysical insight. For example, Rambam seems to accept the influence of the spheres on the elements, even if he thinks the four sphere system is wrong.

A final assessment: Not so unlikely

One of Abarbanel's strongest objections was his observation that Rambam's four sphere cosmology is not found in Chazal. While that observation seems to be correct, that is not true of the pseudepigrapha. The following passage from the book of Enoch 3 corroborates three key ideas: The four sphere theory, the three way division of angels, spheres, and man, and the notion of the rekiem as spheres (galgalim).

R. Ishmael said : Metatron, the angel, the Prince of the Presence, the glory of all heavens, said to me: (1) Seven (are the) princes, the great, beautiful, revered, wonderful and honoured ones who are appointed over the seven heavens. And these are they : MIKAEL, GABRIEL, SHATQIEL, SHACHAQIEL, BAKARIEL, BADARIEL, PACHRIEL. (2) And every one of them is the prince of the host of (one) heaven. And each one of them is accompanied by 496,000 myriads of ministering angels. (3) MIKAEL, the great prince, is appointed over the seventh heaven, the highest one, which is in the 'Araboth. GABRIEL, the 89 prince of the host, is appointed over the sixth heaven which is in Makon. SHATAQIEL, prince of the host, is appointed over the fifth heaven which is in Ma'on. SHAHAQI'EL, prince of the host, is appointed over the fourth heaven which is in Zebul.

BADARIEL, prince of the host, is appointed over the third heaven which is in Shehaqim. BARAKIEL, prince of the host, is appointed over the second heaven which is in the height of (Merom) Raqia. PAZRIEL, prince of the host, is appointed over the first heaven which is in Wilon, which is in Shamayim. (4) Under them is GALGALLIEL, the prince who is appointed over the globe (galgal) of the sun, and with him are 96 great and honoured angels who move the sun in Raqia'. (5) Under them is 'OPHANNIEL, the prince who is set over the globe ('ophari) of the moon. And with him are 88 angels who move the globe of the moon 354 thousand parasangs every night at the time when the moon stands in the East at its turning point. And when is the moon sitting in the East at its turning point? Answer: in the fifteenth day of every month. (6) Under them is RAHATIEL, the prince who is appointed over the constellations. And he is accompanied by 72 great and honoured angels. And why is he called RAHATIEL? Because he makes the stars run (marhit) in their orbits and courses 339 thousand parasangs every night from the East to the West, and from the West to the East. For the Holy One, blessed be He, has made a tent for all of them, for the sun, the moon, the planets and the stars in which they travel at night from the West to the East. (7) Under them is KOKBIEL, the prince who is appointed over all the planets. And with him are 365,000 myriads of ministering angels, great and honoured ones who move the planets from city to city and from province to province in the Raqia' of heavens. (8) And over them are SEVENTY-TWO PRINCES OF KINGDOMS on high corresponding to the 72 tongues of the world. And all of them are crowned with royal crowns and clad in royal garments and wrapped in royal cloaks. And all of them are riding on royal horses and they are holding royal sceptres in their hands. And before each one of them when he is travelling in Raqia' , royal servants are running with great glory and majesty even as on earth they (princes) are travelling in chariot(s) with horsemen and great armies and in glory and greatness with praise, song and honour.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ Odeberg, Hugo. "3 Enoch or The hebrew book of Enoch: edited and translated for the first time with introduction, commentary & critical notes." (1928).

This passage first lists the rulers of the seven heavens, and then places beneath them the physical universe consisting of four different spheres.¹⁴⁶ The spheres are the Sun, Moon, Zodiac, and planets. While the ordering is different from Rambam's theory, the division is identical.

In terms of the elements connecting to the spheres, the passage from Exodus Rabbah, while somewhat late, agrees with this theory of the Merkavah. Further, Zodiac associations with the elements are somewhat of a boon to this position, since some have noted that Yechezkel's vision and the faces he sees may relate to zodiac signs.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, the four elements can be more or less replaced with four fundamental forces, which seems to be a compelling reading of Ezekiel in its own right.

Further, the Hekhalot literature, surprisingly, is an excellent indication in favor of the Rambam's position, confirming several key points including:

- 1) Merkavah relates to prophecy and meditation.
- 2) Merkavah relates to an understanding of the heavens.

The Rambam's reconstruction of the Merkavah thus seems to be, in its majority, a plausible reconstruction of Chazal as long as it is read carefully and in light of the Rambam's full corpus of works.¹⁴⁸

Moving Towards a Non proof based Metaphysics

In part two of the Guide, chapters 2:12, Rambam develops his system of metaphysics. Every point he makes is demonstrated in a dual fashion, that is he attempts to show each fact both via scripture and proof. This makes sense being that the purpose of the

¹⁴⁶ This is an example of complete bifurcation between the physical universe and the heavens. The Talmud in Chagigah placed the physical universe in the lowest two heavens, which is a partial bifurcation, and Rambam thinks the heavens are physical, although the corresponding world of the intellects is not.

¹⁴⁷ Smalley, Stephen S. (2012). *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse*. InterVarsity Press. pp. 120–121.

¹⁴⁸ Of course, we must be careful not to identify Hekhalot too closely with Chazal.

work is to explore the harmony between these disciplines. However, it leaves open the following important question: if Scripture stated a Metaphysical fact that Rambam could not prove, would he accept it? Another way of phrasing the same question is: now that Rambam's proofs are no more, what has become of his metaphysics? Or in a third way: is any of this relevant for the modern reader? While the plausibility of his reconstruction has been shown to be solid, this remains the central unanswered question, which we are now in position to address. While Rambam makes a big deal about philosophical proofs, there are a few reasons to think his position is more complex.

In the second part of the Guide, Ch. 25, he affirms that Scripture is open to many interpretations, and thus the literal meaning of the text is not sufficient cause to believe something. Moreover, one should follow the literal meaning, unless proof can be brought against it. According to our theory, that Metaphysics merely constitutes chapter headings for the real secret which is only revealed via scripture, this makes a lot of sense. Proofs are good for developing a methodology, but scripture must go far beyond that.

As shown above, Rambam felt there was tremendous value in reading Ezekiel. He felt the material contained therein was so important and lofty that he wrote a long introduction explaining how it was permitted for him to write anything on the topic at all, and even then, his comments on Ezekiel are intentionally the most esoteric portion of the entire Guide.¹⁴⁹ All this is true, despite the fact that he thought Ezekiel's cosmology was wrong both with regards to the order of the spheres, the number of the spheres, and how the spheres operate. We further showed that he thought Chazal, as well as Ezekiel, operated in a less proof based system. So how does this work exactly? How does he find meaning in a cosmology entirely removed from what he thinks to be real? The answer lies in Chagigah 12b. Rambam cites this as his source that Chazal believed in 7 spheres. But this is quite surprising, given that the Talmud explicitly places all of the physical universe within the first 2 rekiim, leaving the other five as entirely non-physical.

¹⁴⁹ The reader may note that the only location this work resorted to citing secondary sources explaining a passage from the Guide was regarding his discussion of Ezekiel, since Rambam's words on their own are very difficult to interpret.

This is completely at odds with what the Rambam is using the source for!¹⁵⁰ Thus, if we are to assume that this citation was not a misdirection, this issue must be addressed. Indeed, the notion of seven heavens originates from observations of the physical universe, and thus the Talmud is innovating by accepting the number of heavens, but rejecting the central tenet that led to the number being accepted in the first place. It is taking an ancient idea, and saying that even if the physical aspect is no longer accepted, if the ancients uttered it, we respect its metaphysical value.

This is exactly the approach that the Rambam takes with Ezekiel. It is thus not so surprising that he takes this gemara in stride. While he tries to reconstruct the worldview of Chazal and Ezekiel to understand what they are saying, the resulting ideas are accepted regardless of the truth of the physical implications. Of course, accurate knowledge of genuine physics is of the utmost importance, but the metaphysical implications of Ezekiel and by extension Chazal are not to be rejected out of hand even if they got the physical cosmology wrong.

Indeed, Rambam writes in 2:3 that Aristotle is only valuable in as much as it explains Scripture and Chazal, since it itself has not been proven:

Know that though the opinions held by Aristotle regarding the causes of the motion of the spheres - from which opinions he deduced the existence of separate intellects - are simple assertions for which no demonstration has been made, yet they are, of all the opinions put forward on this subject, those that are exposed to the smallest number of doubts and those that are the most suitable for being put into a coherent order, just as Alexander says in "The Principles of the All." These sayings also are in harmony with many sayings of the Law and more particularly, with what is explained in the generally known Midrashim, about whose having been composed by the Sages there is no doubt, as I shall explain. I therefore shall set forth his opinions and his proofs, so that I may cull from them

¹⁵⁰ The force of this question leads the anonymous commentator to Yesodei Hatorah to offer a novel interpretation where the Rambam never equated spheres with rekiim, but the Rambam's explicit statements in the Guide indicate otherwise.

what agrees with the Law and corresponds to the sayings of the Sages, may their memory be blessed.

All of this comes into clear focus in 2:24. The passage is crucial, and highly controversial. He explains how Aristotle's conception of physics is incompatible with both eccentricity and epicycles, despite these theories being backed by observation:

If what Aristotle has stated with regard to natural science is true, there are no epicycles or eccentric circles and everything revolves round the center of the earth. But in that case how can the various motions; of the stars come about? Is it in any way possible that motion should be on the one hand circular, uniform, and perfect, and that on the other hand the things that are observable should be observed in consequence of it, unless this be accounted for by making use of one of the two principles or of both of them? This consideration is all the stronger because of the fact that if one accepts everything stated by Ptolemy concerning the epicycle of the moon and its deviation toward a point outside the center of the world and also outside the center of the eccentric circle, it will be found that what is calculated on the hypothesis of the two principles is not at fault by even a minute.

He even says that Aristotle was unaware of this, and that:

If, however, he had heard about it, he would have violently rejected it; and if it were to his mind established as true, he would have become most perplexed about all his assumptions on the subject.

Finally, he concludes:

All that Aristotle states about that which is beneath the sphere of the moon is in accordance with reasoning; these are things that have a known cause, that follow one upon the other, and concerning which it is clear and manifest at what points wisdom and natural providence are effective. However, regarding all that is in the heavens, man grasps nothing but a small measure of what is mathematical; and

you know what is in it. I shall accordingly say in the manner of poetical preciousness: The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth hath He given to the sons of man. I mean thereby that the deity alone fully knows the true reality, the nature, the substance, the form, the motions, and the causes of the heavens. But He has enabled man to have knowledge of what is beneath the heavens, for that is his world and his dwelling-place in which he has been placed and of which he himself is a part. This is the truth. For it is impossible for us to accede to the points starting from which conclusions may be drawn about the heavens; for the latter are too far away from us and too high in place and in rank. And even the general conclusion that may be drawn from them, namely, that they prove the existence of their Mover, is a matter the knowledge of which cannot be reached by human intellects. And to fatigue the minds with notions that cannot be grasped by them and for the grasp of which they have no instrument, is a defect in one's inborn disposition or some sort of temptation. Let us then stop at a point that is within our capacity, and let us give over the things that cannot be grasped by reasoning to him who was reached by the mighty divine overflow so that it could be fittingly said of him: *With him do I speak mouth to mouth.*

As many have noted, this passage seems to severely undermine the entire Guide. After taking pains to establish all that could be known about heaven and proof of God, Rambam backhandedly states that nothing can be known of heaven, and even proof of God is “a matter the knowledge of which cannot be reached by human intellects!” No small amount of ink has been spilled over this problematic statement. As early as Ibn Tibbon, the Guide’s first translator, textual amendments were proposed. Strauss and his school intimate that this is evidence that Rambam did not believe in God at all, or that he was agnostic¹⁵¹. Others propose that an extremely nuanced read of the original Arabic numbs the problem.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Pines, Shlomo. "The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Al-Farabi, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides." (1979).

¹⁵² All these approaches are treated in: Davidson, Herbert A. "The Problematic Passage in " Guide for the Perplexed" 2: 24." *Aleph* 8 (2008): 163-193.

However, none of these approaches work. Ibn Tibbon's emendation, while possible, is unlikely. Rereading the Arabic is possible, but is both an awkward read, and one that only lessens the problem, not solving it. The Straussian approach is worst of all, for that school fails to notice that in this passage, Rambam is not undermining religion, he is undermining philosophy!

However, there is another way to read the passage altogether, one that flows naturally from the entirety of this thesis. Taking this passage at face value we have Rambam, ahead of his time, fully aware that the entire cosmology his entire system is based on is wrong. All of Aristotelian celestial physics contrasts observation. Thus, as he says at the end, we must rely on scripture.

Of course this begs the question: why have we spent so much time expounding upon a false system?! The answer lies in our analysis of Rambam's attitude toward Ezekiel. Despite thinking Ezekiel's cosmology was wrong, Rambam tries to reconstruct it. In a similar vein, Aristotelian physics was a means to an end, as Rambam told us numerous times. The only way to explain the Rambam's preoccupation with Celestial physics is that it is an aid in reconstructing Scripture. Like his view of Ezekiel's vision, the physical truth of such a system is not relevant. What matters is that this system is a reconstruction of what the prophets were talking about. This passage is clear proof that Rambam had moved away entirely from a proof based metaphysics.

When we consider Rambam's view of prophecy, as the prophet projecting the vision into his own worldview, it almost has to be the case that the prophet's system is of value irrespective of the truth of his worldview. While Ezekiel may have gotten some physical facts wrong, Rambam maintains his metaphysical knowledge is still correct. For prophecy is given as a vision, which is for the prophet to interpret. That Ezekiel projected his vision onto four spheres may have been due to his worldview, but it does not matter, because it must have been based on his vision, and thus all the implications of a four sphere reality must be consistent with what he was shown. It may not be true that the spheres make noise, but the fact that Ezekiel thought they did means that the implications of spheres making noise are consistent with some plane of reality.

A general approach to antiquated science in divine literature

From the above analysis emerges a comprehensive theory of dealing with antiquated science in the prophets, one which we can perhaps apply recursively to the Rambam himself.

Accordingly, the method is as follows: do not attempt to reconcile with modern science passages which clearly do not concord with it. Rather, read them on their own terms, and accept them as truth, even if not in the way that the prophets imagined. Even if the prophet thought he was describing physical reality, we can understand the ideas in a purely metaphysical plane, much as how the Talmud in Chagigah reinterpreted the seven heavens. This middle approach does not rely on the far flung apologetics of those who would reinterpret all of Scripture to fit with science, nor does it have the dismissive quality of those who would say that scientific narrative is meaningless in its details, as only the big picture ideas are relevant.

Interestingly, while this is rarely explicitly stated, modern religion makes use of this principle quite often, perhaps with some discomfort. For example, the average Jew will tell you that there are seven heavens, but also that the universe is heliocentric. This dissonance is not readily apparent, since most people do not know the geocentric origins of the notion of seven heavens. Historically, the notion of seven heavens transitioned from a purely physical idea to one that existed entirely in a non-physical plane.¹⁵³ Undoubtedly, most people do not consider the tremendous dissonance of this position, however it is in perfect harmony with Rambam's approach.

¹⁵³ Christianity has a similar phenomenon, where modern Christians preserve many notions of angelology, despite rejecting their origin.

Conclusion

We set out with a question: what relevance does Rambam's reconstruction of Merkavah, the central point of the Guide, have to us today. To answer this question, we have, through close reading and analysis, demonstrated the following points:

1. From His earliest writings to the Guide, Rambam has been largely consistent in this matter, undermining the view that he did not really believe that he was reconstructing the Merkavah.
2. When critically reading what Rambam says, his assumptions about Chazal, while not perfectly accurate, are not too far off, both in his understanding of the heavens, and to a lesser degree in his assumptions regarding the four elements.
3. We showed that Physics and Metaphysics are not Ma'aseh Bereshit and Merkavah, but the chapter heads with which to understand what is contained in scripture, prophecy, and tradition.
4. Our analysis of the Ezekiel chapters in Guide part 3, as well as 2:24, demonstrates that Rambam attempted to understand Ezekiel's metaphysical outlook, despite not thinking it was correct, and spent half the book developing his own metaphysical system, despite admitting everything Aristotle said about the heavens goes against readily observable evidence.
5. The Rambam's view of prophecy explains his preoccupation with metaphysical systems despite not believing the physics they were based on. Prophets take the word of God and filter it through their own perspectives and worldviews. Ezekiel's metaphysics must have truth in it, as Ezekiel was a prophet. Thus, Rambam is very concerned with understanding what Ezekiel was saying, even if he thinks it was based on a false cosmological outlook. As shown from the Talmud in Chagiga, these metaphysical ideas can be understood as truths in a purely non-physical plane of reality.

The relevance today is thus undiminished from the day Rambam wrote it. Even in his age, he doubted that his metaphysical universe corresponded with physical reality, and yet he found value in using Aristotle to reconstruct the worldview of the prophets and

understand what they were saying. Perhaps he did not realize just how wrong his physics were as we know today, but that is irrelevant. So now we can finally answer the question: Do the obscure cosmological passages of the Guide have relevance to Jewry today? The answer is a resounding yes!